OBJECTIONABLE 1950s EC COMICS!

INCREDIBLE SCIENCE FICTION

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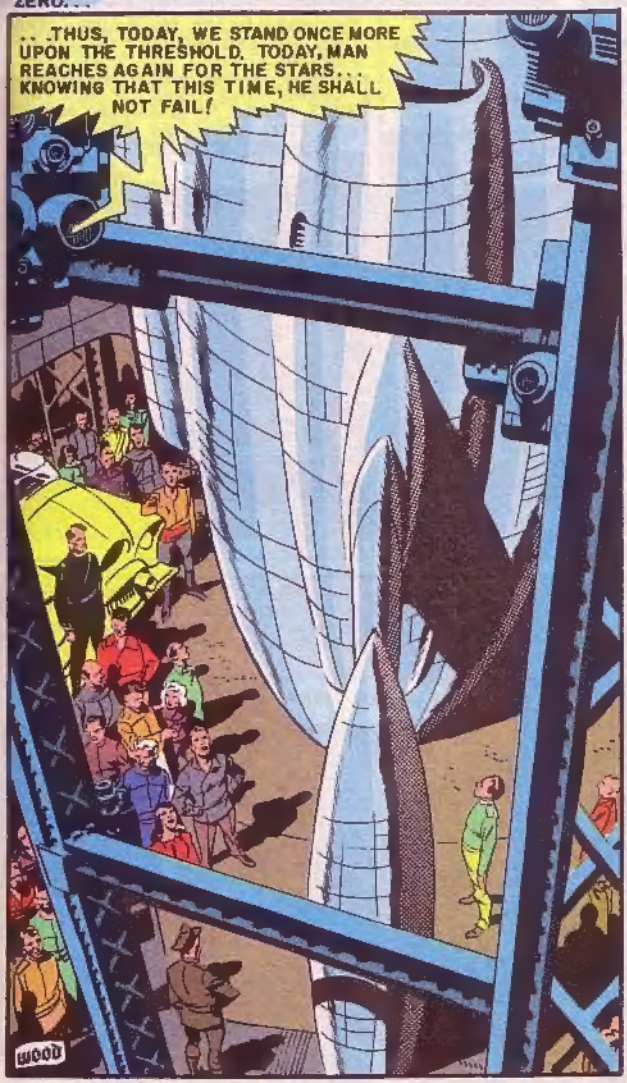
INCREDIBLE SCIENCE FICTION

NO. 31
OCTOBER
10¢

APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY

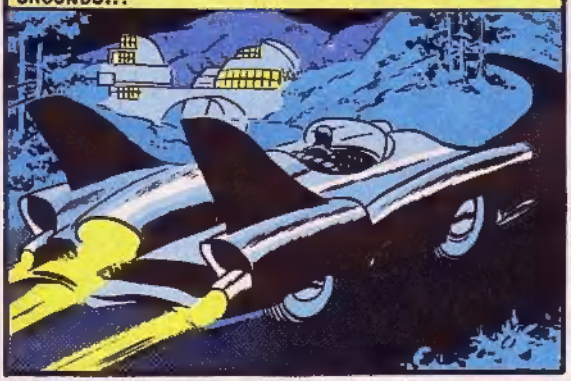
YOU ROCKET

THE SHIP IS YOU AND YOU ARE THE SHIP. YOUR SKIN IS AN ALLOY HARDER THAN DIAMOND. YOUR SKELETON IS BERYL STEEL. YOUR NERVES ARE TENDRILS OF PLATINUM. YOUR FOOD IS ATOMIC ENERGY. YOU SEE THROUGH PHOTO-ELECTRIC EYES. YOU HEAR THROUGH SONIC VIBRATORS. YOU LISTEN TO THE TINY, CRAWLING THINGS BELOW... AND YOU MARVEL. YOU MARVEL THAT SUCH CREATURES CREATED YOU. FOR WHAT HAVE YOU TO DO WITH THEM? THEY ARE BUT MEN. WHILE YOU...YOU ARE A *ROCKET*. AND IT IS THIRTY MINUTES TO ZERO...

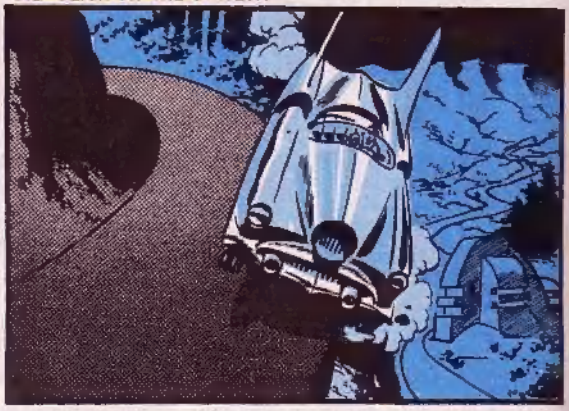


THE VOICE BELOW DRONES ON AND ON. DEEP WITHIN YOUR SLEEK METAL BODY, YOUR BRAIN THAT WAS ONCE HUMAN LISTENS. BUT YOU FEEL ONLY A COLD, ALOOF AMUSEMENT...

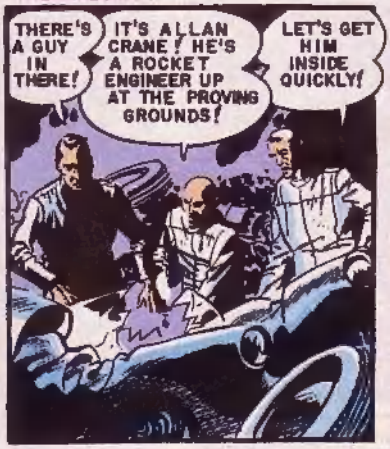
YOU LISTEN TO THOSE PUNY HUMANS FAR BELOW YOU, SPEWING THEIR SENTIMENTAL DRIVEL, AND YOU'RE GLAD YOU'RE NOT ONE OF THEM. YOU'RE GRATEFUL FOR THAT ACCIDENT SO LONG AGO. YOU CAN STILL REMEMBER... VAGUELY... THE ROCKET CAR, WHIPPING NORTH TO THE PROVING GROUNDS...



YOU'D BEEN A SCIENTIST. YOU'D WORKED WITH THOSE PUNY HUMANS ON THEIR FIRST FEEBLE ATTEMPTS TO CONQUER SPACE. AND YOU'D WITNESSED THEIR FAILURES. YOU NEVER SAW THE OIL-SLICK ON THE CURVE...



YOUR ROCKET CAR HAD SKIDDED, SWERVED, SWUNG WILD, PLUNGED OVER THE CLIFF. AND YOU NEVER SAW THE MEN IN THEIR WHITE LAB COATS POUR FROM THE NEARBY BUILDING, RACE TO THE WRECK...

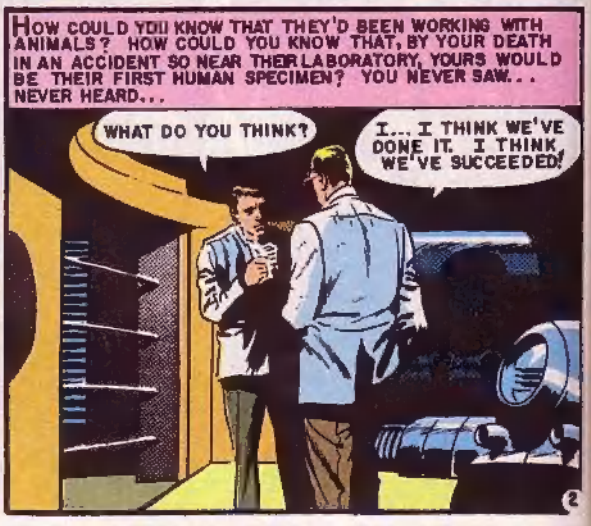


YOU NEVER SAW THEM TAKE YOU INSIDE... LAY YOU UPON THE STERILE TABLE WITHIN THE LABORATORY. YOU NEVER SAW THE CONTAINERS AROUND THE WALLS... WITH THEIR VARIOUS-SIZED SPECIMENS...

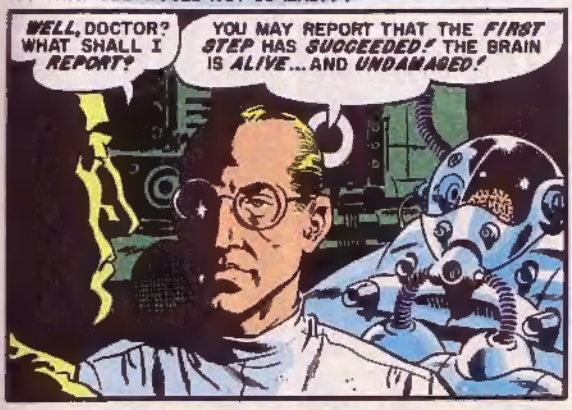
YOU NEVER HEARD THE PAUSE... AND THEN THE EXCITED VOICE OF ONE OF THE MEN...

YOU'D DIED, ALLAN CRANE. YOU'D DIED IN A ROCKET CAR ACCIDENT. YOU WERE GONE FROM THIS EARTH AS A HUMAN BEING. AND YET, THESE MEN WORKED UPON YOU...

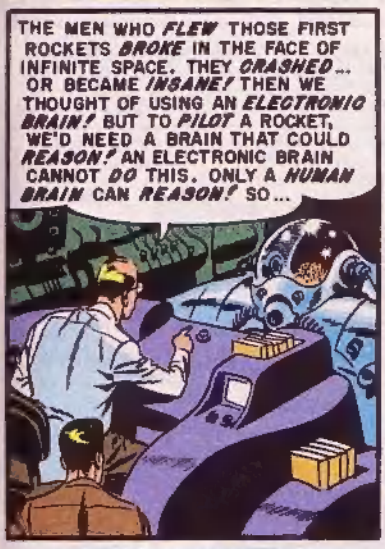
HOW COULD YOU KNOW THAT THEY'D BEEN WORKING WITH ANIMALS? HOW COULD YOU KNOW THAT, BY YOUR DEATH IN AN ACCIDENT SO NEAR THEIR LABORATORY, YOURS WOULD BE THEIR FIRST HUMAN SPECIMEN? YOU NEVER SAW... NEVER HEARD...



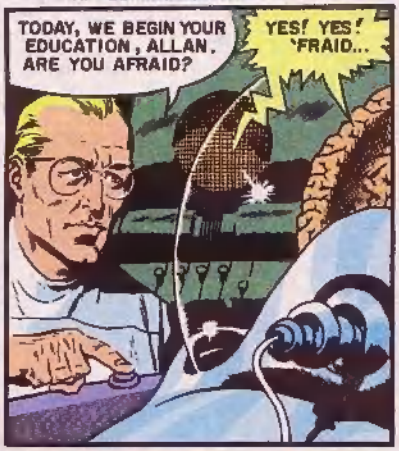
HOW COULD YOU UNDERSTAND, AT FIRST? HOW COULD YOU KNOW WHAT THEY'D DONE TO YOU? THEY'D WIPED YOUR BRAIN CLEAN, BACK TO ITS EARLIEST RECOLLECTIONS, SO THAT YOU WOULD NOT GO MAD...

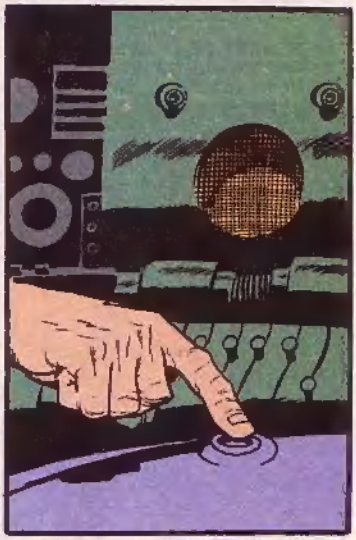


THEY'D EXPLAINED IT TO YOU, YEARS AFTERWARD. YOU HAD BEEN HONORED. YOU HAD BEEN CHOSEN TO FLY MAN'S FIRST SUCCESSFUL INTERPLANETARY ROCKET...

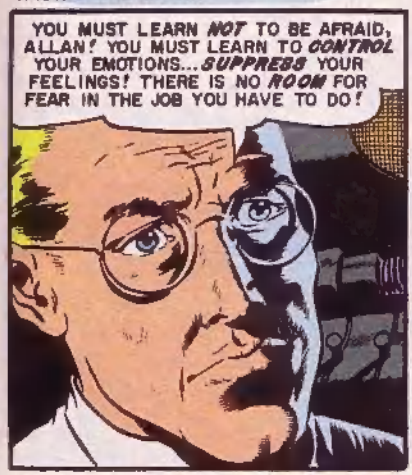


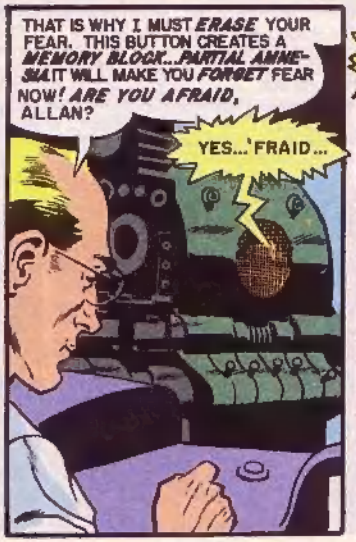
THEY'D EXPLAINED IT TO YOU, YEARS AFTERWARD. BUT AT FIRST, YOU'D KNOWN ONLY LONELINESS...FEAR. AND THAT HAD BEEN ELIMINATED...QUICKLY...



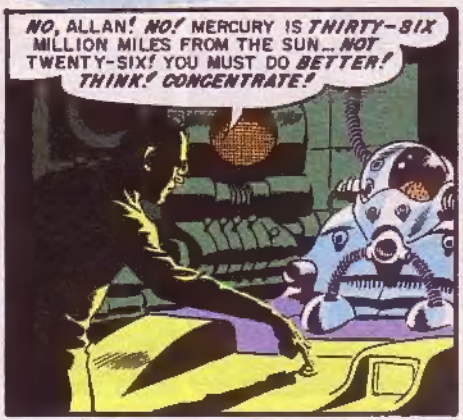


HE'D PRESSED A BUTTON...AND THE DARKNESS HAD CLOSED IN. YOU HADN'T UNDERSTOOD...

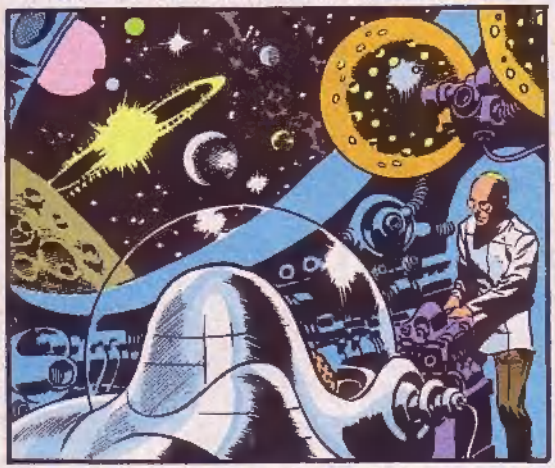




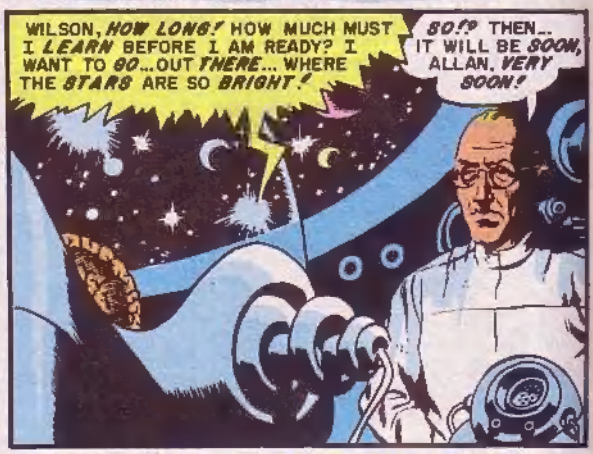
SO IT HAD BEGUN. THE LONG YEARS. THE COLD YEARS. HIS NAME WAS WILSON. IT WAS HIS MIND WHICH HAD CONCEIVED THIS PLAN. HOW YOU'D SUFFERED...HOW YOU'D HATED HIM AT FIRST...



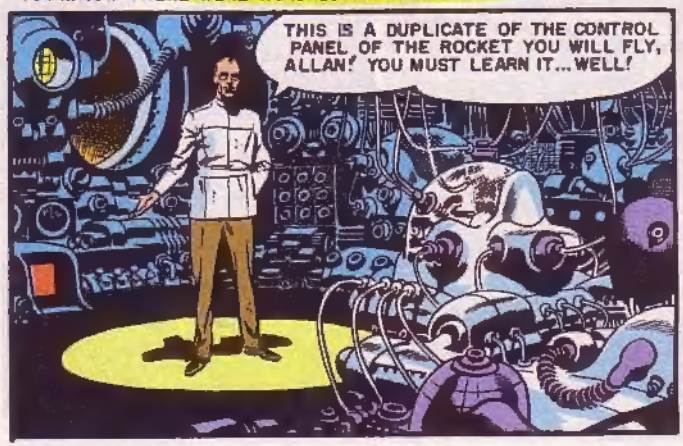
THIS MUST BE! A WHOLE SCIENTIFIC WORLD HAD SAID IT! AND THE PLAN WENT ON. JUST SO MUCH PAIN...JUST SO MUCH TEACHING...JUST SO MUCH SUGGESTION...



IN THE END, THE PLAN HAD SUCCEEDED. IT HAD TO SUCCEED. IN THE END, YOU HAD EVEN BEGUN TO WONDER: HOW IT WOULD FEEL TO BE FREE...WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE TO BE OUT THERE...IN SPACE...IN THE INFINITE VOID...



BUT WILSON HAD LIED. IT HADN'T BEEN SOON. A FEW DAYS LATER MEN HAD COME AND CARRIED YOU TO ANOTHER PLACE. AND WHERE, BEFORE, THERE HAD BEEN A DOZEN PLATINUM WIRES LEADING FROM YOU...NOW THERE WERE HUNDREDS...THOUSANDS...

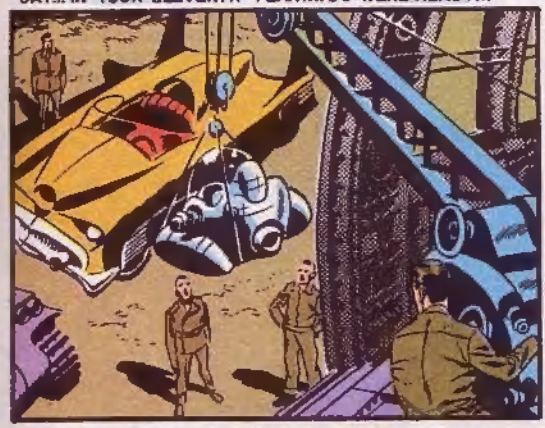


A NEW PHASE OF YOUR EDUCATION HAD BEGUN. DAY AFTER DAY, YOU WERE TAUGHT FLIGHT PROCEDURE... NAVIGATION...COURSE-CONTROL... EMERGENCY ACTION...

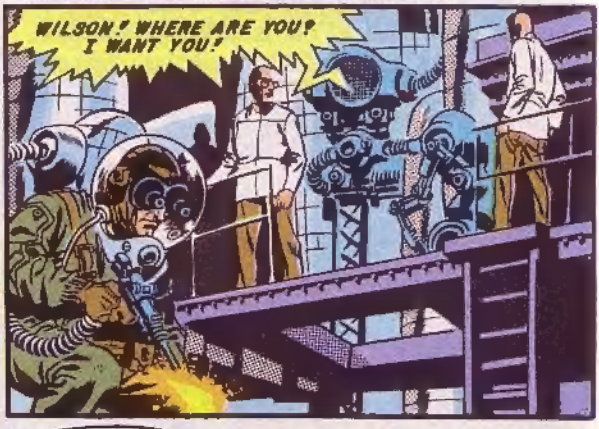
OVER AND OVER. TEST...TRIAL...PRACTISE...

AND IT *WENT* ON, ON AND ON. THE TRAINING. THE PRACTISING. AND WITH THE KNOWLEDGE CAME THE TRUTH...THAT YOU WERE *ABOVE* THESE PUNY HUMANS WHO HAD TRAINED YOU. WHAT *MAN* COULD DO, *YOU* COULD DO...ONLY *FASTER*...*BETTER* ...*MORE ACCURATELY*...

IT WAS WILSON WHO'D FIRST SAID IT. YOU WEREN'T HUMAN! NOT ANY MORE! MAN HAD SUCCEEDED. MAN HAD MADE YOU MORE THAN HUMAN. AND THEN...ONE DAY...IN YOUR ELEVENTH YEAR...YOU WERE READY...



THEY'D BUILT YOU A SHIP AND MADE YOU A PART OF IT. YOU'D ONLY TO THINK AND THE IMPULSE FLED ALONG PLATINUM WIRES TO SHIFT A STUD, OR PULL A LEVER, OR ACTIVATE THE BRAZEN METAL VOICE THEY'D GIVEN YOU...

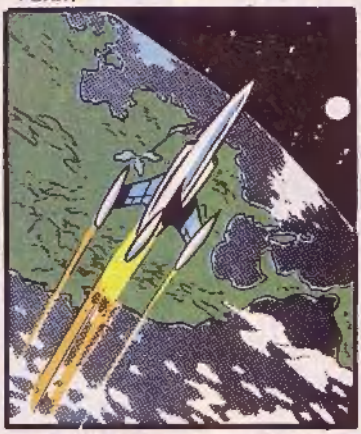


YOU'D COME TO KNOW YOUR OWN POWER, THEN. YOU'D GLORIED IN IT...

LOGIC, WILSON! LOGIC MINUS EMOTION! IT'S IRRESISTIBLE! YOU TAUGHT ME THAT! I HAVE BECOME VALUABLE...ERGO, YOU WILL NOT RISK DESTROYING ME! THEREFORE, I AM MASTER NOW!
WELL, WILSON? I ASKED YOU A QUESTION!
YOU...YOU TAKE OFF IN ONE WEEK! YOUR DESTINATION WILL BE MARS. IF YOU SUCCEED, YOU WILL CARRY PASSENGERS ON YOUR SECOND FLIGHT!
IF I SUCCEED!? I WILL SUCCEED WILSON! I AM PERFECT! A MAN MIGHT FAIL! BUT I AM NOT A MAN! I AM A THINKING MACHINE! FOR THAT, I THANK YOU!
A "THINKING MACHINE." YOU'D SAID THE WORDS PROUDLY, FOR THE FIRST, ONLY A WEEK AGO. AND NOW, YOU WAIT... CHAFING AT THE SLOWNESS OF TIME... WAITING FOR ZERO HOUR...
...THUS, THIS TIME, WE CANNOT FAIL!
WE! WE! THE PRATTLING LITTLE PEOPLE. THEY DREAMED. THEY ASPIRED. BUT THEIR DREAM IS NO LONGER THEIRS. IT'S YOURS NOW! YOU! THE MACHINE...
AT LAST THEY TAKE AWAY THE HYDRAULIC RAMS THAT SUPPORT YOU. THEY FLEE TO THEIR SHELTERS, SO THAT YOUR BLAZING ROCKET TUBES WILL NOT MAKE CINDERS OUT OF THEM. YOU STAND PROUD, FLEXING YOUR SINEWS...
THREE... TWO... ONE...
YOU THINK THE PROCEDURE YOU'VE REHEARSED A MILLION TIMES BEFORE. THE ATOMIC ENGINES ROAR. YOU SHUDDER AS GREAT BILLOWING CLOUDS OF FLAME AND ROCKET EXHAUST POUR DOWN UPON THE CONCRETE BELOW...

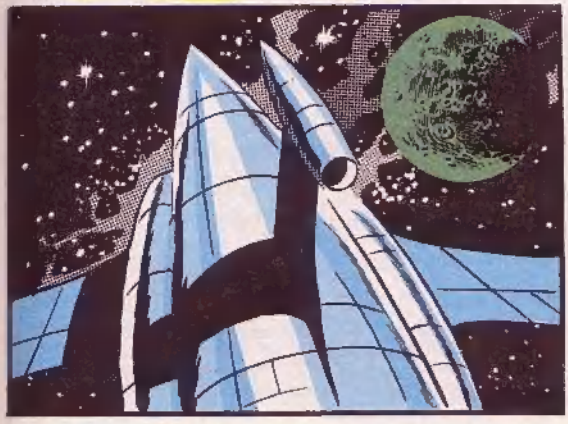
YOU SHAKE YOURSELF FREE OF THE DUST OF EARTH AND YOU RISE, HOWLING, INTO THE NIGHT. YOUR TRAIL, A LINE OF BLUE FIRE...

YOU ARE POWER! YOU ARE MAJESTY. EARTH'S GRAVITY FADES. EARTH HERSELF DWINDLES AND VANISHES. YOU ARE ABOVE EARTH! ABOVE MAN! ABOVE PAIN AND FEAR!



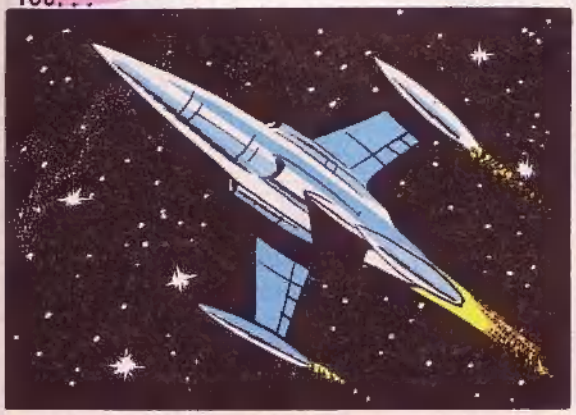
IT LIES BEFORE YOU... INFINITY! THE ENDLESS VASTNESS OF BLACK SPACE! THIS IS YOUR LIFE! THIS IS YOUR DESTINY! THIS...

ABOVE FEAR? BUT THEN, WHY IS IT THAT AS YOU FEAST YOUR DOZEN LENS-EYES ON THE VASTNESS AROUND YOU, THE BLACKNESS SEEMS SO BLACK... THE VOID SEEMS SO BIG... SO VERY BIG?

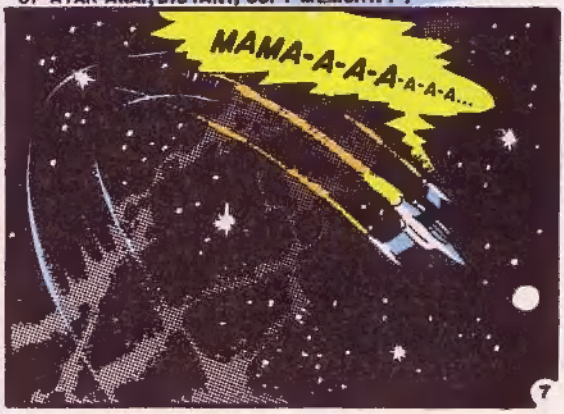


WHY IS IT THAT THE STARS ARE SUDDENLY A WHIRLING FUNNEL... SUCKING YOU UP... UP INTO NOTHINGNESS? WHY DO YOU FEEL SO ALONE? SO VERY MUCH ALONE! ONLY MAN NEEDS COMPANY!

THOSE... THOSE OTHERS MUST HAVE FELT LIKE THIS! BUT THEY WERE MEN! PUNY MEN! YOU AREN'T A PUNY MAN! YOU'RE A MACHINE! YOU MUST FIGHT DOWN THE SUDDEN SOUL-CHILLING FEAR! YOU MUST! YOU... YOU...



YOU TURN BACK! BECAUSE MEN ARE NOT GODS! BECAUSE YOU ARE STILL A MAN AFTER ALL! AND THEN, IN YOUR LONELINESS, MAN-LIKE, YOU CALL FOR HELP. JUST BEFORE YOU SEEK REFUGE IN MADNESS, YOU DREDGE UP A FAR AWAY, DISTANT, SOFT MEMORY...



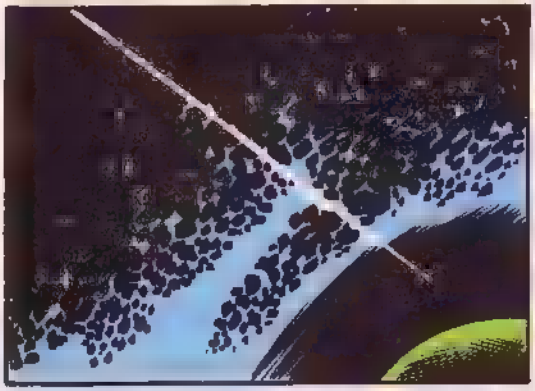
FULFILLMENT

PROLOGUE: THE WORSHIPPERS WAITED IN SILENCE. THEIR TEMPLE WAS DARK AND GLOOMY WITH SHADOWS. BUT SOON, NIGHT'S BLACK TAPESTRY WOULD BE TORN ASIDE. EACH DAY, THIS MIRACLE WAS REPEATED, YET NEVER DID THE WORSHIPPERS LOSE THEIR AWE. THEIR DARK EYES FASTENED ON THE IMAGE OF IVORY AND STONE BEHIND THE PRIEST. AND WHEN THE FIRST YELLOW RAYS OF MORNING SUNLIGHT LANCED DOWN THROUGH THE OPENING IN THE TEMPLE'S ROOF, THEIR SIGNS WERE A SONG OF RAYS OF ADORATION...

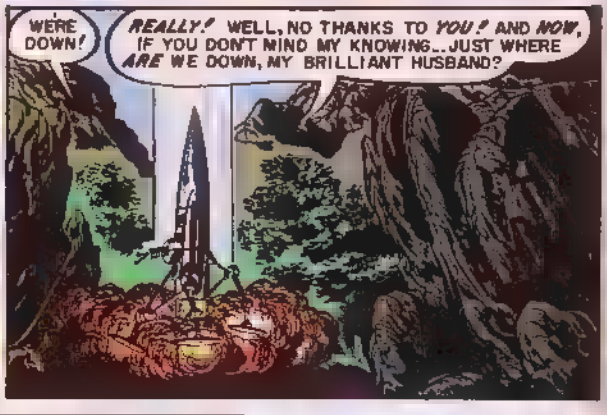
THE FIRST RAY OF MORNING MOVED SLOWLY. IT TOUCHED THE TEMPLE FLOOR AND MOVED ON. IT FOUND THE IMAGE SHROUDED IN SHADOW...

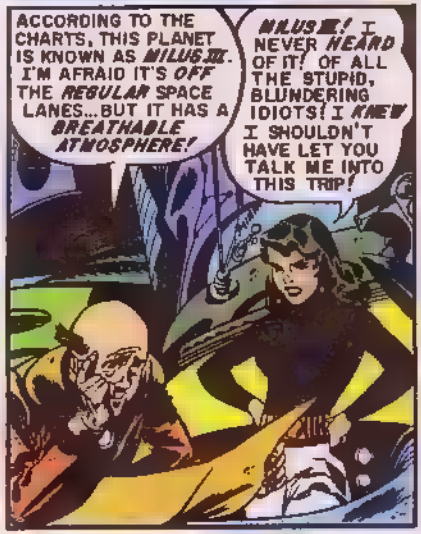
THE HIGH PRIEST'S VOICE DIED. HE TURNED, FACING THE IMAGE. AND WHEN HE SPOKE AGAIN, HIS VOICE WAS SOFT AND FEARFUL...

STORY: THE OBJECT WAS SMALL... A MERE SPECK IN THE VAST COSMOS. IT CAME LIKE A METEOR... FROM SPACE... FROM THE INFINITE BLACKNESS. BUT IT DID NOT FLARE AND BURN AND DIE WHEN IT STRUCK THE ATMOSPHERE...



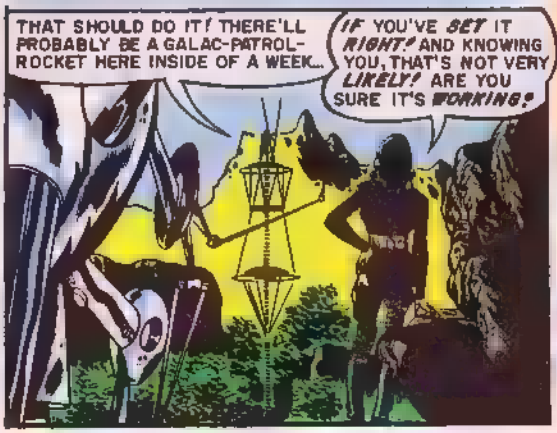
ONLY THE TUBES AT THE OBJECT'S STERN SPAT FIRE. FIRE WHICH TURNED THE OBJECT... AND BRAKED IT... SO THAT, WHEN ITS AUTOMATIC CONTROLS LANDED IT, THE MAN AND THE WOMAN WITHIN ITS ALLOY SHELL FELT HARDLY A JAR...

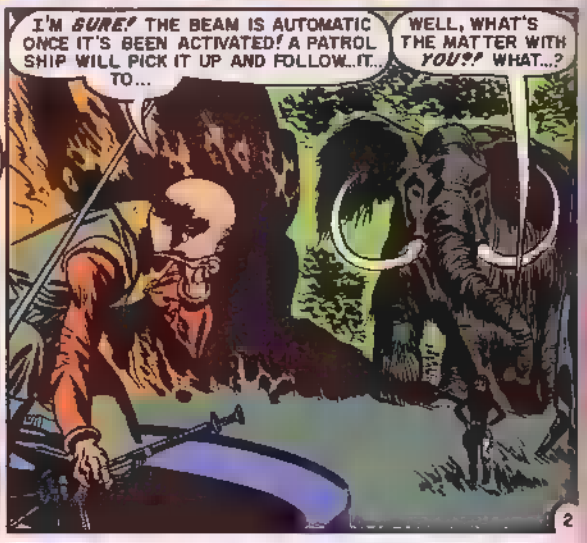


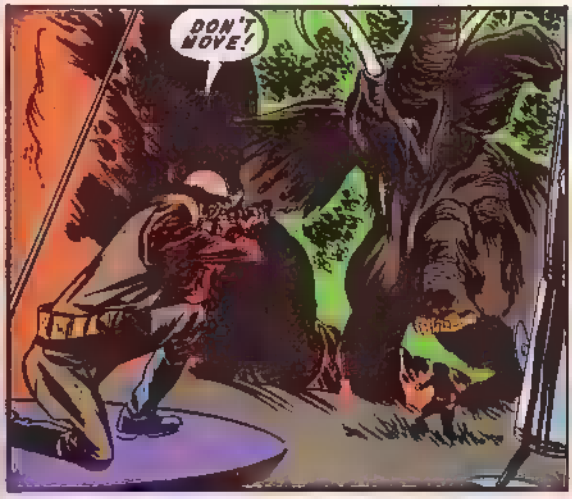


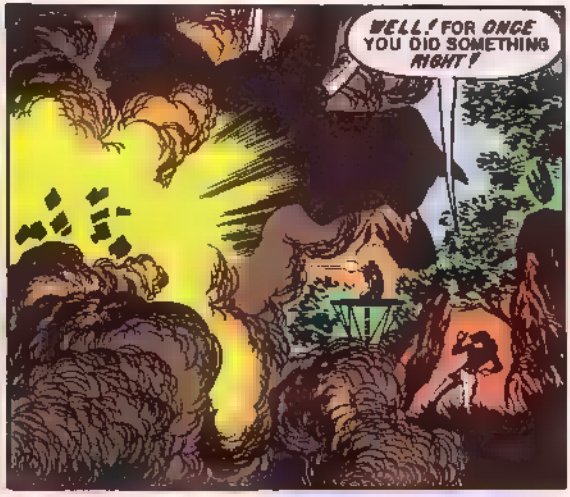
DEEP DOWN INSIDE, THE MAN SIGHED. IF ONLY HE HAD THE COURAGE TO STAND UP TO HER... TO DEFEND HIMSELF. BUT HE DIDN'T HAVE THAT COURAGE...

THE MAN WENT OUT OF THE SHIP IN SILENCE. SETTING THE GUIDE BEAM WASN'T COMPLICATED. ONE MERELY RAISED THE BEAM-ANTENNA, ACTIVATED THE TRANSMITTER, AND A SIGNAL WAS SHOT ACROSS SPACE. BUT THE MAN WAS SLOW... CLUMSY...









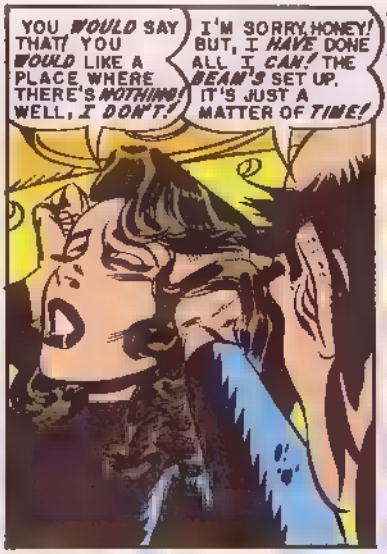
THERE WAS NO DANGER, REALLY. THE NEUTRON GUN COULD DISINTEGRATE A MOUNTAIN IF NECESSARY. BUT THE WOMAN WAS A SHREW. SHE WAS STILL GRUMBLING LATER WHEN THE MAN DESCENDED...

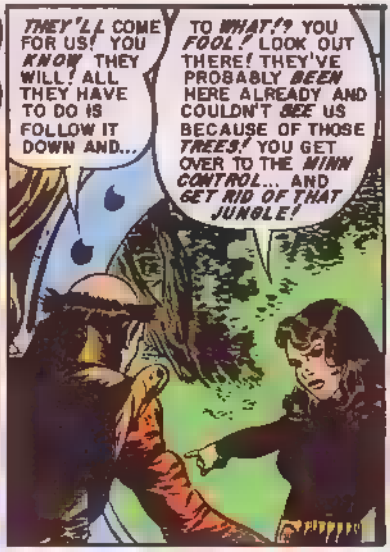
THE MAN ATE THE FOOD FROM THE I-R-RAY STOVE SLOWLY. LATER, HE LISTLESSLY DROPPED THE DISHES INTO A DISPOSAL BIN. THE WOMAN DIDN'T EVEN LOOK UP WHEN HE WENT OUT...

WHY SHOULD SHE LOOK UP? SHE'D FOUND ONE OF THOSE SICKENING-SWEET LOVE STORIES ON THE TRI-D. VIDEO SCREEN. SHE NEVER EVEN KNEW WHEN HE LEFT THE SHIP AND STEPPED INTO THE COOL PEACEFUL EVENING AIR...

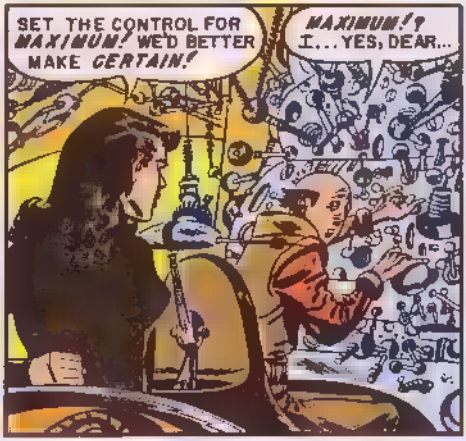
PEACE! THE MAN BREATHED DEEP. IT WAS A PLEASANT PLACE, THIS PLANET. YOUNG. UNSPOILED. IF HE COULD ONLY REMAIN HERE...NEVER TO GO BACK TO DRABNESS... TO MONOTONY. HE COULD BE LIKE A KING HERE. BUT... THE MAN TURNED BACK TO THE SHIP... IT WAS JUST A DREAM. HE HAD HIS... HIS RESPONSIBILITIES...

NO! FOR HIM, PEACE WAS JUST A WORD. HE HOPED THE GALAC-PATROL-SHIP WOULD COME SOON. BUT, IT DIDN'T AND EACH DAY, THE NAGGING GREW WORSE...



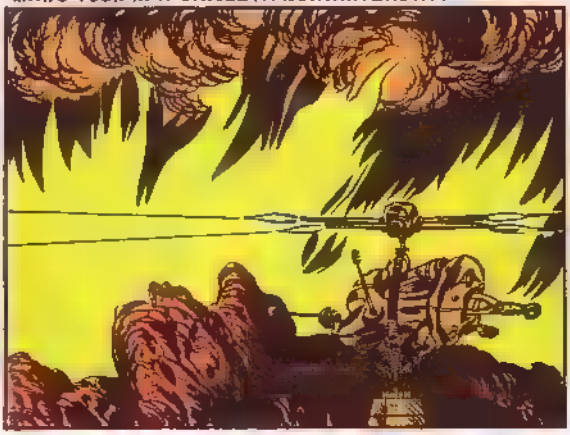


THE MAN WANTED TO PROTEST. BUT HE HAD BEEN TOO LONG MARRIED TO THIS SHREW... TOO LONG BEATEN DOWN...

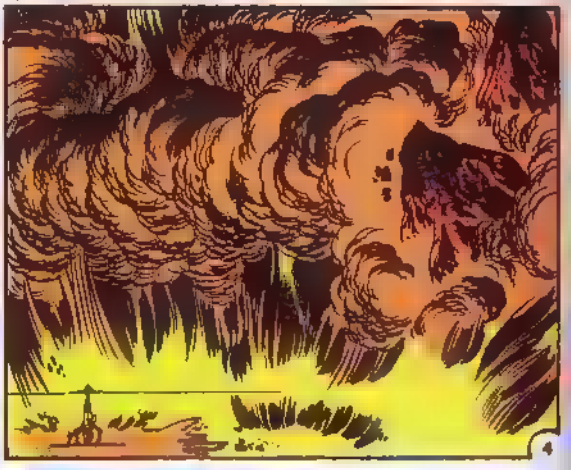


THERE WERE FOUR OF THE TUBES. WHEN THE MAN PRESSED A STUD, THEY ROSE FROM THE ALLOY SKIN OF THE SHIP AND AS HE PRESSED THE FIRING BUTTON, HE THOUGHT ABOUT THE LITTLE FOUR-LEGGED, TWO-TOED ANIMALS...THE BEAUTIFUL TREES... THE PITY OF IT...

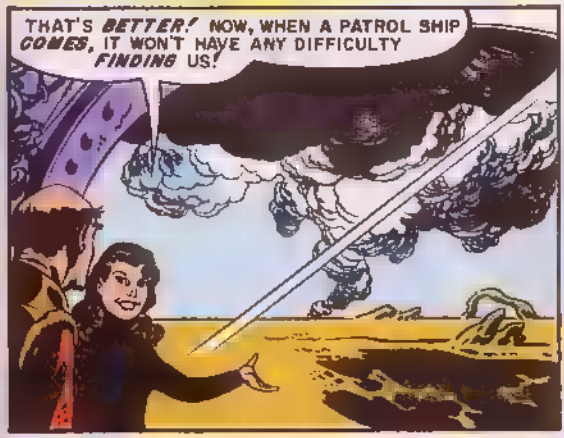
ANOTHER STUD...AND THE TUBES ROTATED, SO THAT THE RAW DESTRUCTIVE ENERGY STREAMING FROM THEIR MAWS TOOK IN A CIRCLE... NORTH...EAST...



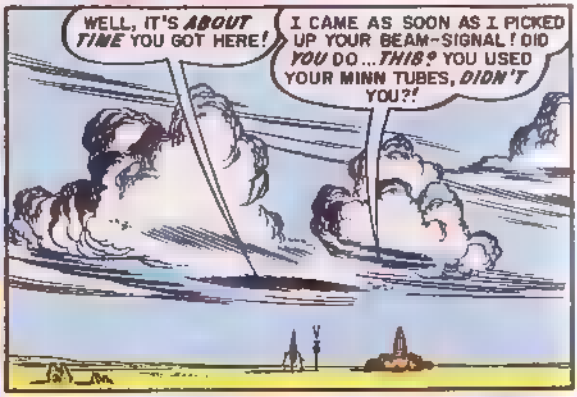
...SOUTH...WEST...

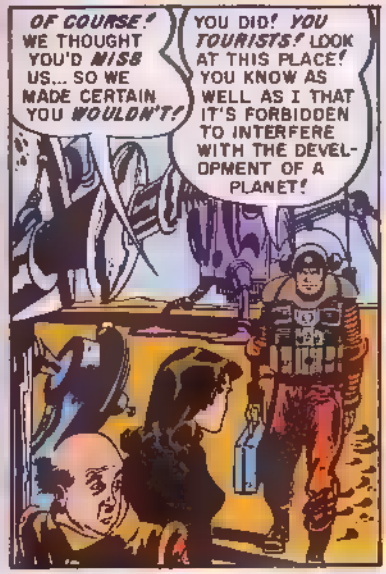


A JUNGLE VANISHED, ROCKS MELTED AND RAN MOLTEN LIKE WATER. A LAKE BOILED ITSELF AWAY ■ CLOUDS OF STEAM. IT DID NOT TAKE LONG...



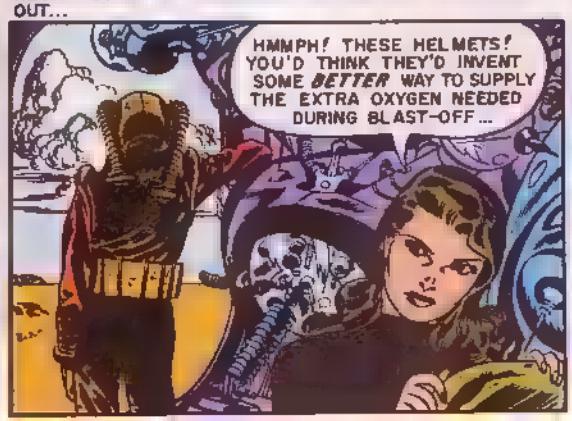
THOUSANDS OF SQUARE MILES OF LUSH GREENERY HAD BEEN BURNED AWAY, LEAVING A SCORCHED, BARREN WASTELAND. BUT THE WOMAN WAS RIGHT. THE PATROL SHIP HAD NO DIFFICULTY FINDING THEM WHEN IT ARRIVED A FEW DAYS LATER...



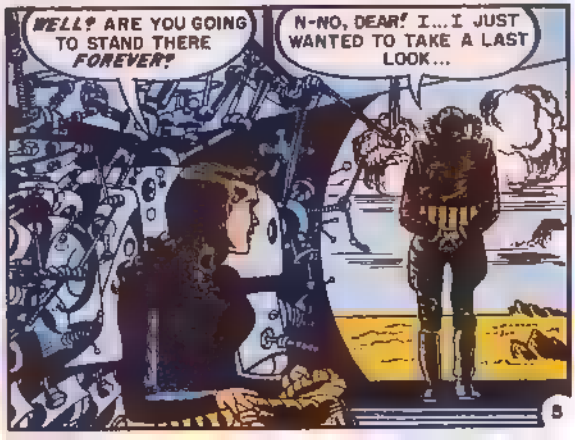


FIFTY CREDITS! WHILE THE PATROLMAN WORKED THE MAN THOUGHT ABOUT THAT AND SHOOK HIS HEAD. BUT WHAT COULD HE DO?...

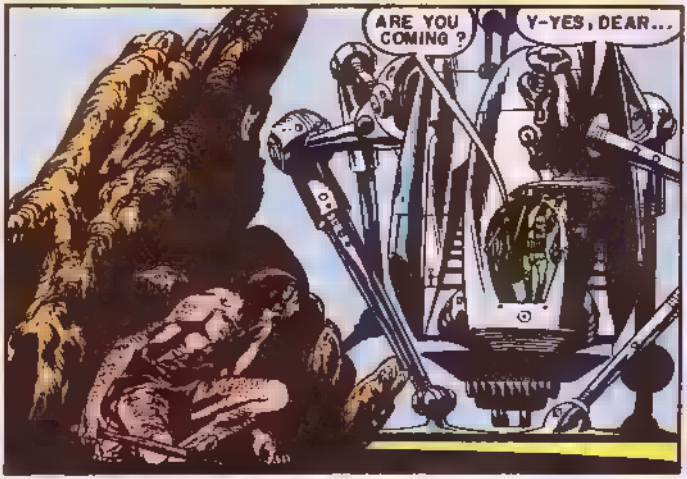
THE PATROLMAN LEFT, ANGRILY. THE MAN DONNED HIS BLAST-OFF HELMET. HE MOVED TO THE CONTROLS, BUT HESITATED AT THE OPEN PORT OF THE SHIP AND LOOKED OUT...



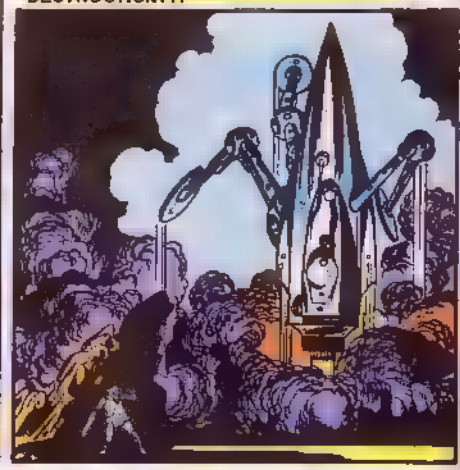
THE MAN LOOKED OUT OVER THE SCORCHED WASTES, REGRETFULLY...



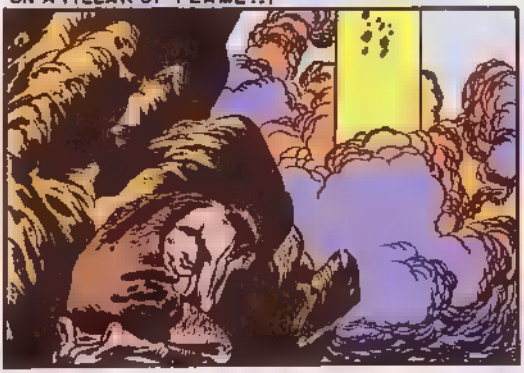
THE MAN LOOKED OUT AND SIGHED. IT WAS A PLEASANT WORLD. HOW HE WOULD HAVE LOVED TO HAVE STAYED! HERE, HE'D HAVE *BEEN* SOMEBODY! IN A WORLD LIKE THIS, A MAN... EVEN A BEATEN-DOWN, MILQUETOAST LIKE HIMSELF... COULD BE *MASTER*... *KING*... A *GOD*, ALMOST! IT WAS A PLEASANT THOUGHT...



BUT IT WAS ONLY A DREAM. THE MAN CLOSED THE SHIP'S PORT UPON HIS DREAM. HE NEVER SAW THE CREATURE WHICH HAD WATCHED HIM... THE CREATURE WHICH, SOMEHOW, HAD ESCAPED THE MINN RAY DESTRUCTION...



THE MAN NEVER SAW THE CREATURE FALL TO ITS KNEES IN FRIGHT AND AWE AS THE ROCKET ROSE ON A PILLAR OF FLAME...



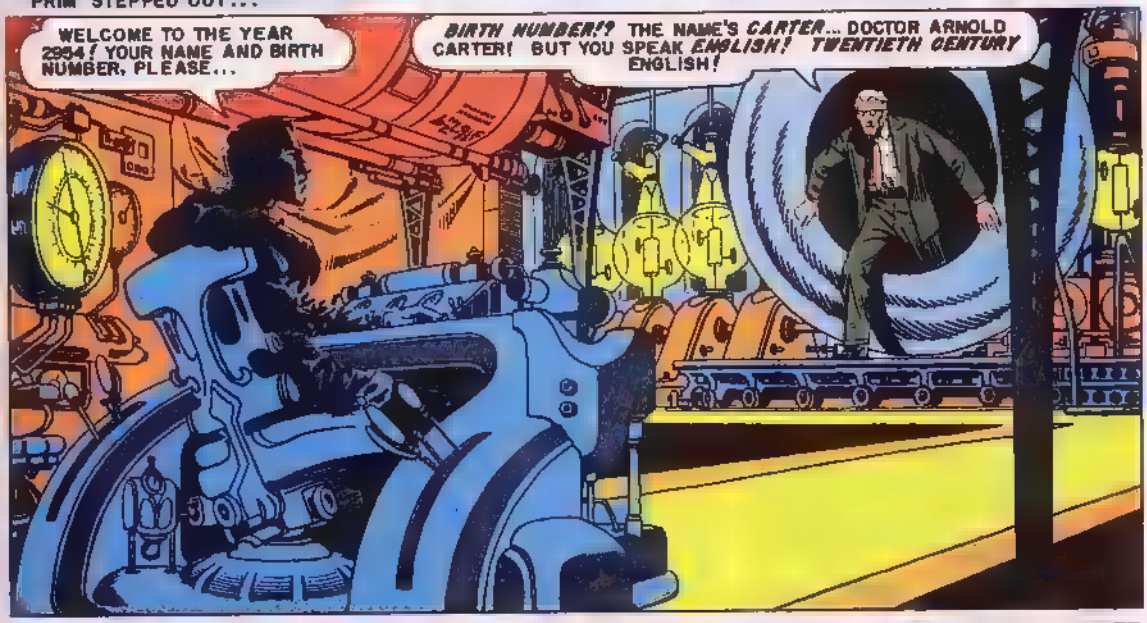
NO, THE MAN KNEW NOTHING OF THAT. HE LAY ON HIS SHOCK-COUCH AND HIS BLAST-OFF HELMET MADE HIM SEEM GROTESQUE AND MISHAPEN. AND HIS DREAM WAS A HOPELESS THING...

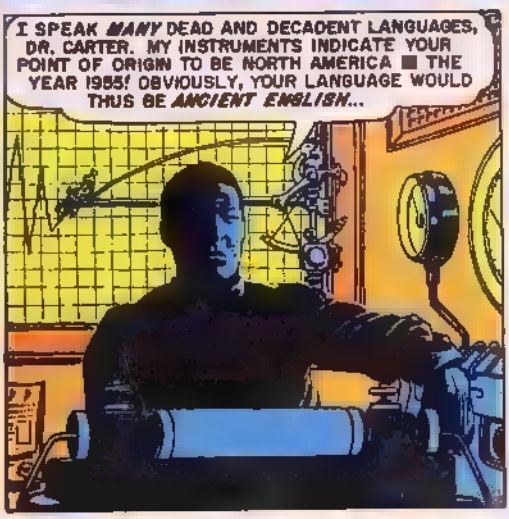
EPILOGUE: THE TEMPLE WAS NO LONGER DARK NOW. IT STOOD UPON THE DESERT SANDS, THE MORNING SUN STREAMING THROUGH ITS MASSIVE PILLARS. AND ALL EYES WITHIN IN WERE ON THE IVORY AND STONE IMAGE...

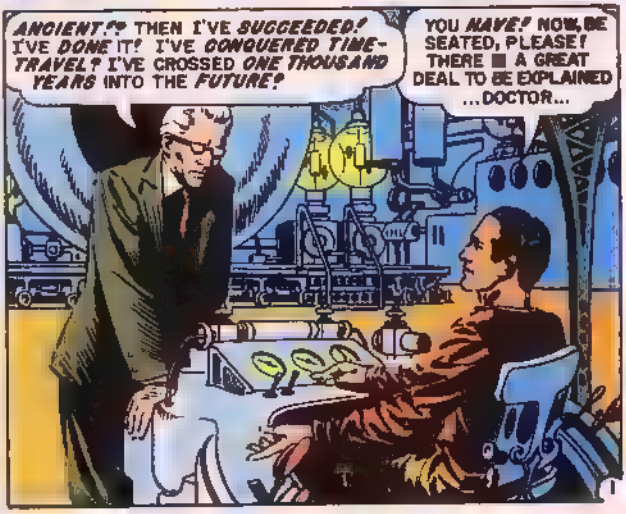
THE PRIEST TURNED FROM THE IMAGE TO THE WORSHIPPERS...

TIME TO LEAVE

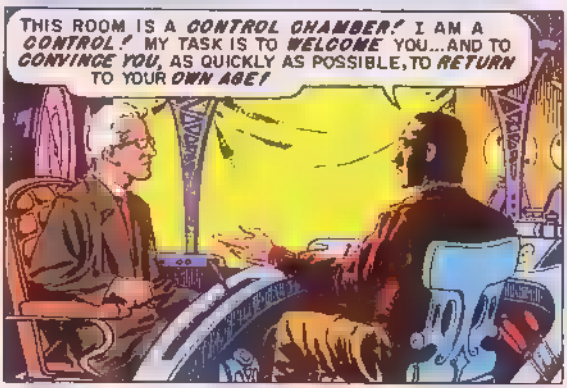
GARVIN WAITED PATIENTLY FOR THE "PRIM". THE INSTRUMENTS BEFORE HIM GLOWED. AND AS HE STUDIED THEM, HE WONDERED IDLY WHAT THIS ONE WOULD BE LIKE. A PERSPIRING, ODOROUS SPECIMEN, PROBABLY, WHO WOULD GAPE IN AWE AT THE ANTISEPTIC GLEAMING CONTROL CHAMBER, AND BE AMAZED THAT GARVIN SPOKE HIS LANGUAGE, AND WHO WOULD EVENTUALLY GO SCURRYING WILLINGLY BACK INTO HIS OWN TIME. THEY ALWAYS DID. GARVIN WONDERED WHY. BUT THEN, ONE COULD NOT EXPECT A "PRIM" TO BE MORE THAN SEMI-RATIONAL. A LIGHT BLINKED. GARVIN PRESSED A STUD. ON THE PLATFORM, A METALLIC SPHERE MATERIALIZED, AND, AFTER A MOMENT, THE "PRIM" STEPPED OUT...

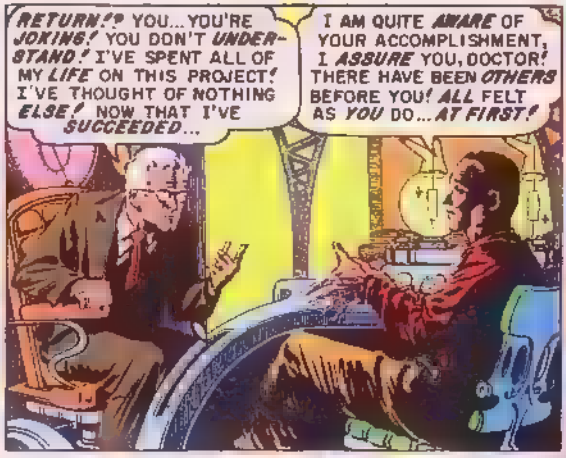


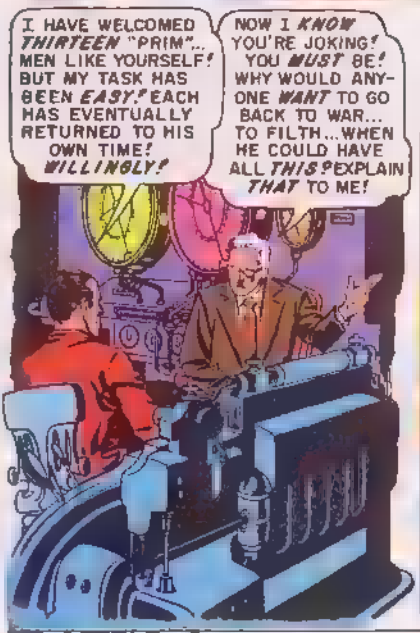




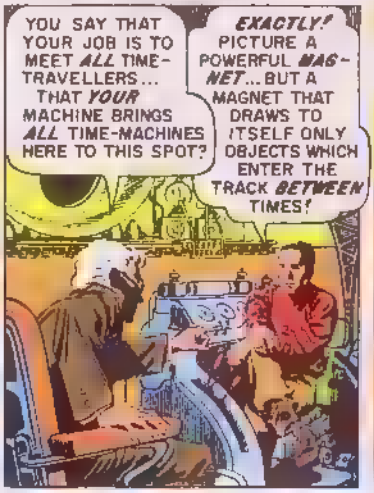
DOCTOR! THESE PRIMITIVES WITH THEIR ARCHAIC TITLES! GARVIN'S NOSTRILS TWITCHED WITH DISTASTE. THEY WERE LIKE APES. HE WASTED NO TIME...

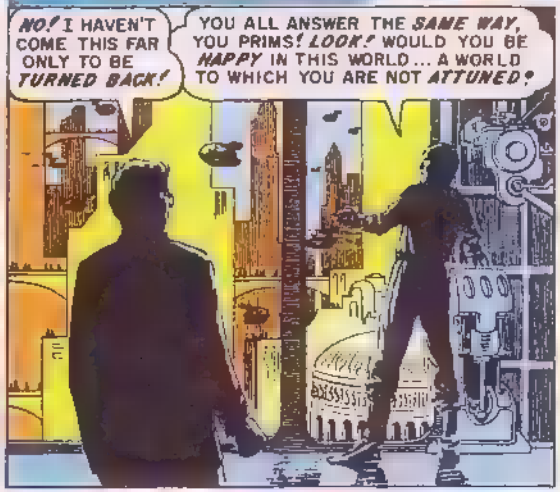


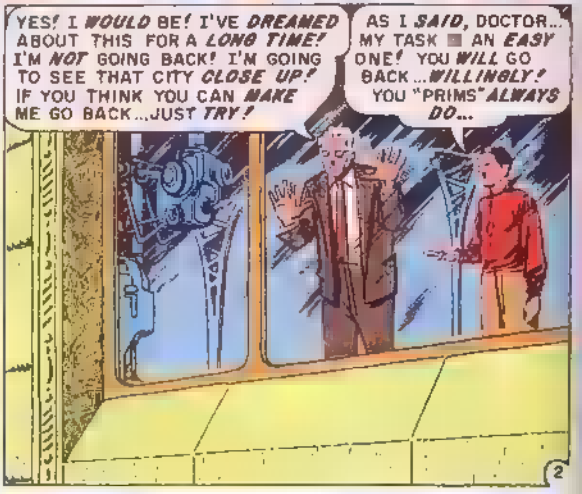


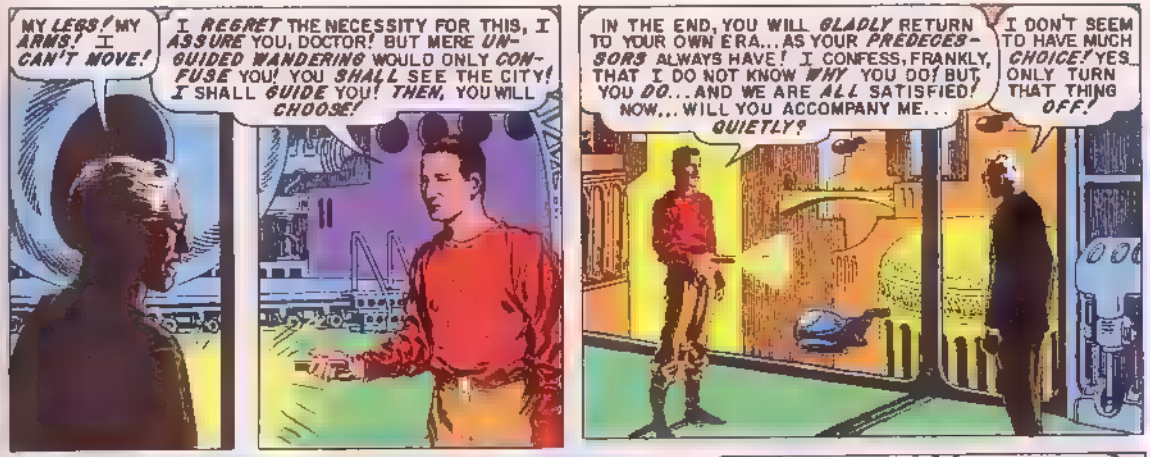


SO MANY TIMES GARVIN HAD ASKED HIMSELF THAT SAME QUESTION. BUT HE DID NOT KNOW THE ANSWER. INSTEAD, HE WENT ON...EXPLAINED HIS WORK...THE ILLOGIC OF THE "PRIM'S" PRESENCE HERE...

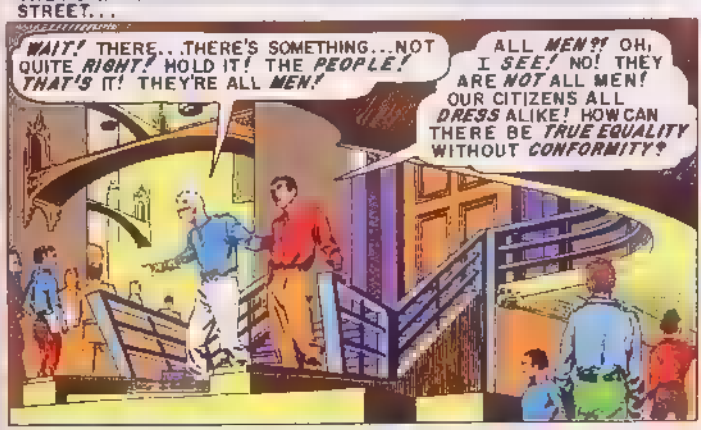




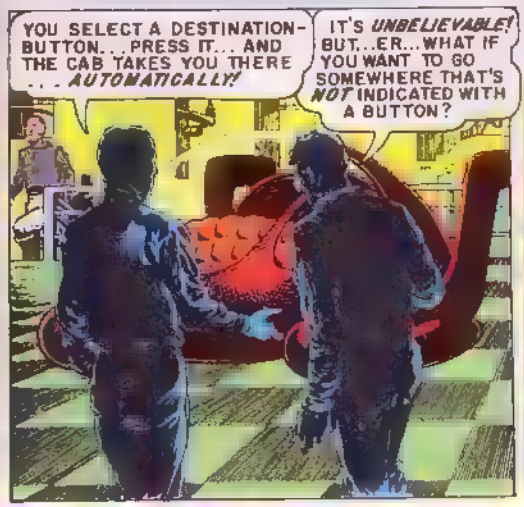




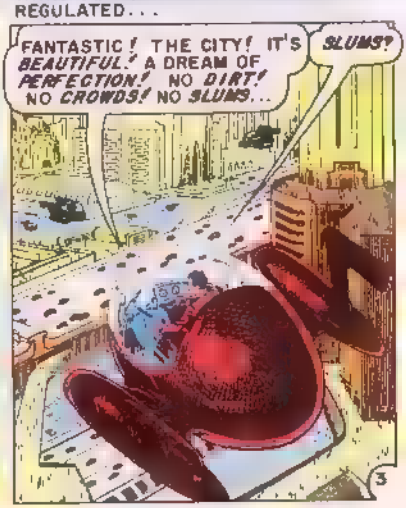
GARVIN LED THE WAY. BUT FIRST, HE HELPED THE "PRIM" INTO A CHANGE OF CLOTHING. IT WOULD NOT HAVE DONE TO HAVE THE CITIZENS DISTURBED BY THE DOCTOR'S STRANGE GARMENTS. THEN THEY STEPPED FROM THE CONTROL CHAMBER INTO THE BROAD ALLOY STREET...

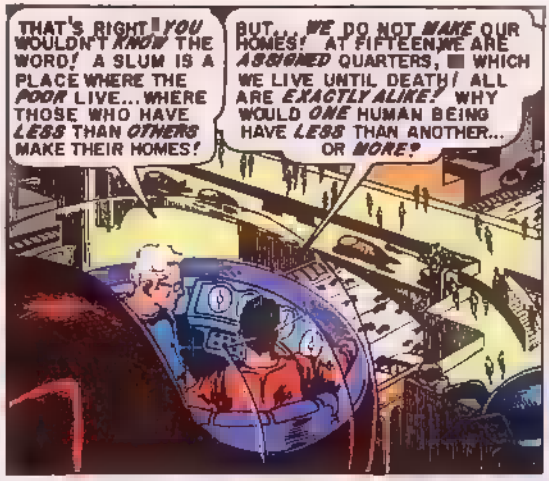


THE "PRIM" FOLLOWED DOCILELY. THE POOR "PRIM"! GARVIN SHUDDERED AS HE TRIED TO PICTURE HIS COMPANION'S WORLD. WHAT A CONFUSED, CHAOTIC PLACE IT MUST HAVE BEEN. HOW THE "PRIM" GAWKED AT THE AIR-CAB...

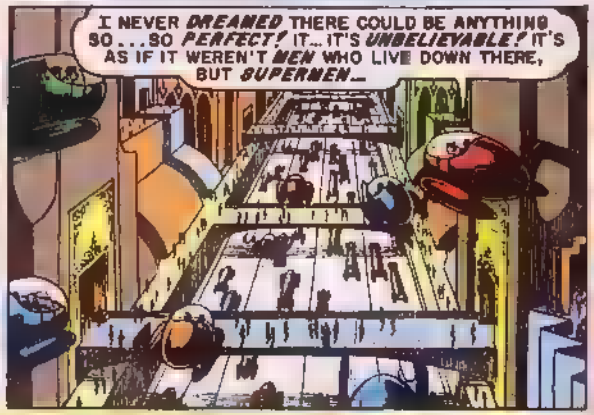


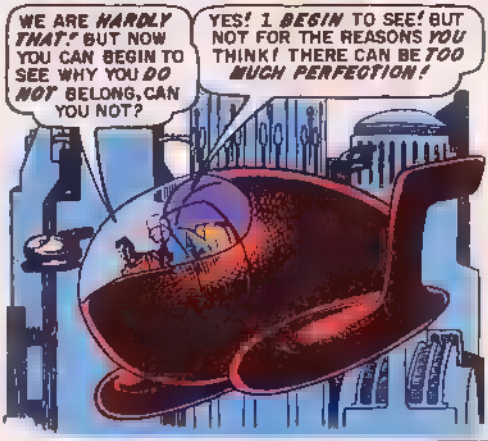
IT SEEMED TO GARVIN THAT THE "PRIM" ASKED PECULIARLY STUPID QUESTIONS. WHAT A MONSTROSITY LIFE WOULD BE IF TRAVEL, LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE, WERE NOT CAREFULLY REGULATED...



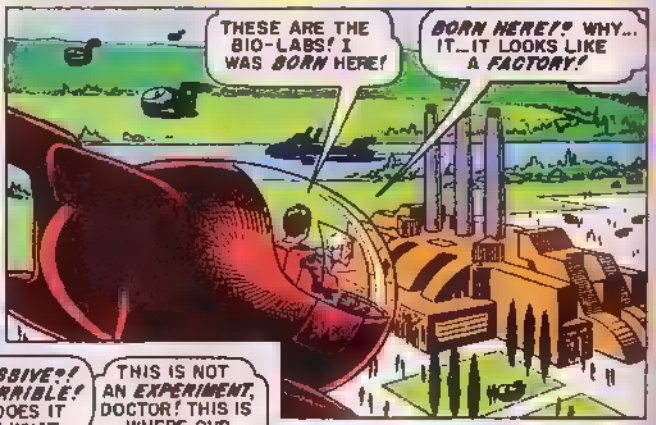


GARVIN SHOOK HIS HEAD. THE "PRIM" MADE NO SENSE. AND YET, SEMI-SAVAGE THOUGH HE WAS, HE COULD STILL GRASP THE MAJESTY OF WHAT LAY BEFORE HIM WHEN THE CAB WAS FULLY AIRBORNE...

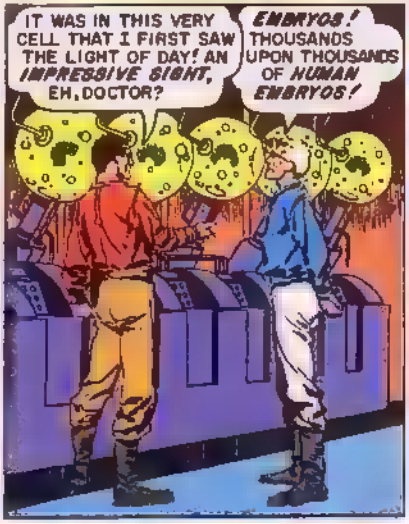


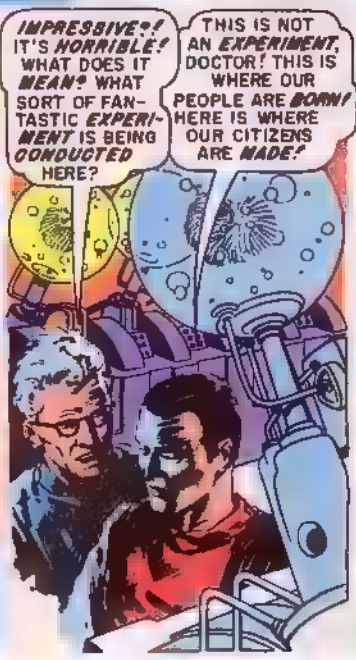


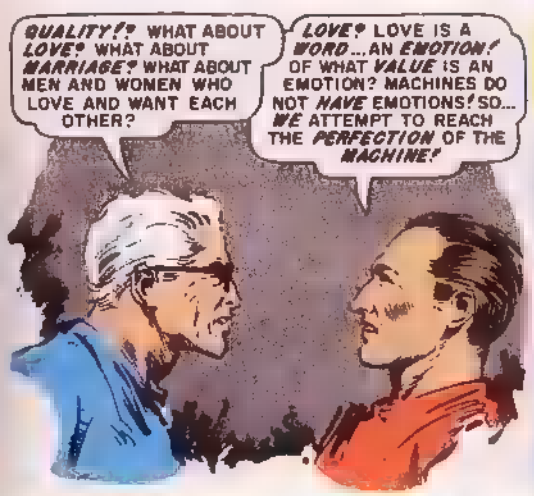
THE COMPLETE, UNBELIEVABLE IDIOCY OF THE "PRIM". ALMOST, IN HIS SUPERIORITY, GARVIN SNICKERED. BUT THEN, THE AIR-CAB WAS AT ITS DESTINATION...



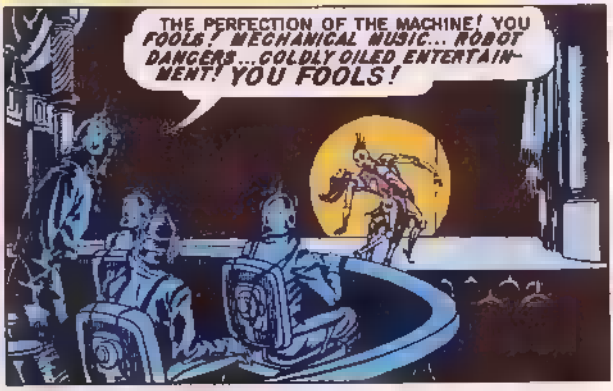
A FACTORY!? THE VERY HEART... THE VERY SOUL OF TODAY'S CIVILIZATION, AND THIS BARBARIAN CALLED IT A FACTORY! GARVIN ALMOST PERMITTED HIMSELF TO FEEL ANGER, BUT NOT QUITE. HE LED THE WAY INSIDE... PROUDLY...

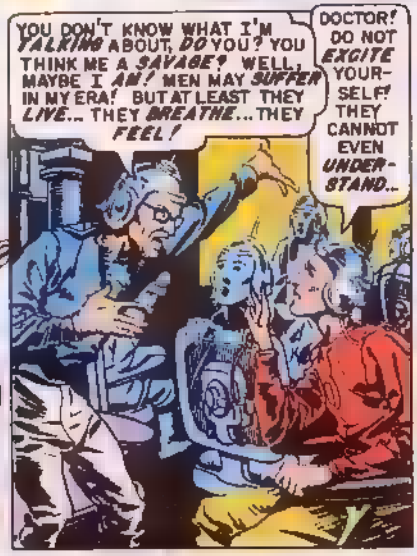




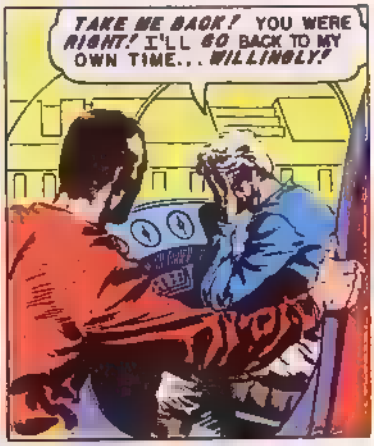


THE "PRIM" FLED THEN, AS THEY ALL HAD DONE. LIKE THE OTHERS, ALMOST HYSTERICALLY, HE RAN FROM THE CELL. GARVIN TOOK HIM TO THE MUSEUM, THEN... TO THE THEATER, NEXT. AND THE "PRIM'S" EYES BURNED. HIS VOICE WAS ALMOST A SNARL...

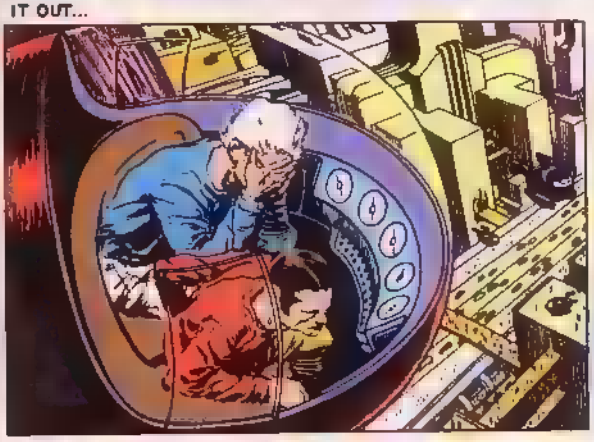




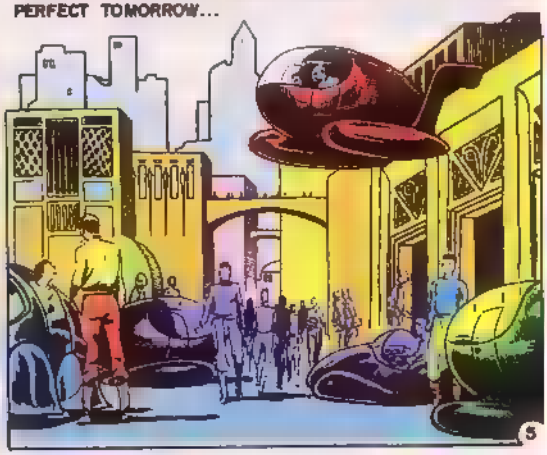
BUT THE "PRIM" WAS BEYOND REASONING. HE HURRIED OUT TO THE AIR-CAB. HE'D HIDDEN HIS FACE IN HIS HANDS WHEN GARVIN CAME AFTER HIM...



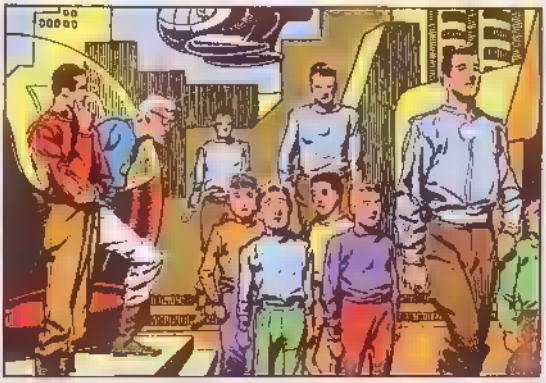
ALWAYS, ■ THE END, IT WAS LIKE THIS. THE "PRIMS" SOMEHOW WERE ALWAYS CONVINCED. AND GARVIN STILL COULD NOT UNDERSTAND. DURING THE RETURN TRIP, HE STARED DOWN AT THE ORDERED PANORAMA BELOW, TRYING TO FIGURE IT OUT...



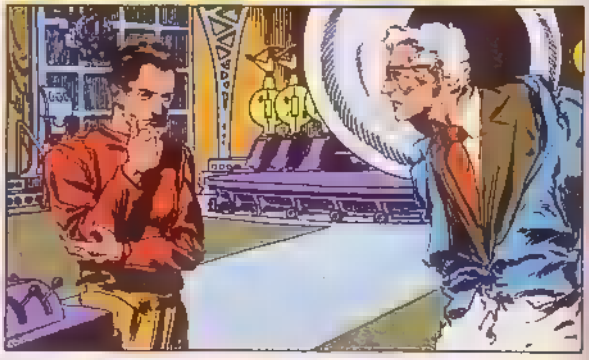
GARVIN NOTED THE PERFECT SYMMETRY OF THE CITY. IT WAS LIKE HIS LIFE. NO LOOSE ENDS. A UNIT. A COMPLETE THING...PLANNED PERFECT TODAY...PLANNED PERFECT TOMORROW...

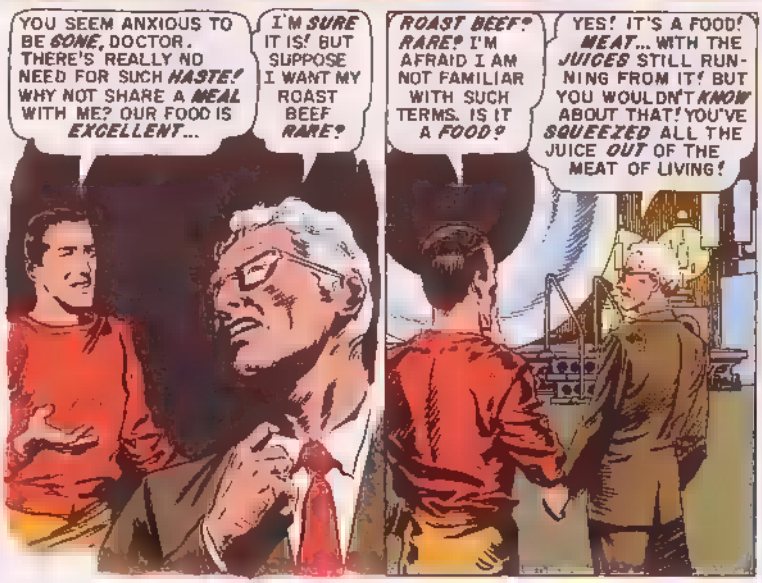


GARVIN LOOKED AT THE CITIZENS AROUND HIM...AT THE SERENE FACES, DEVOID OF ALL DESIRES FOR WEALTH, FOR POWER, FOR LOVE. HE STARED AT A GROUP OF PASSING CHILDREN THAT WOULD NEVER KNOW FEAR OR WANT ...OR LOVE...

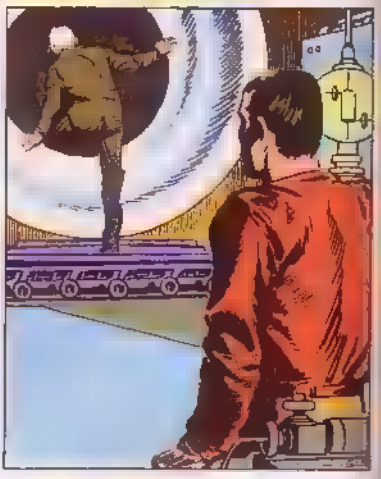


AND STILL HE DID NOT UNDERSTAND! WHY? WHY WOULD EVEN A BARBARIAN OUT OF THE PAST LOOK AT THIS COLDLY PERFECT WORLD AND SHUDDER? WHY WOULD A "PRIM" HURRY, AS CARTER WAS NOW, TO RETURN TO THE CONTROL CHAMBER...TO RIP OFF HIS COVERALLS...TO RUSH BACK TO HIS SAVAGE WORLD?...

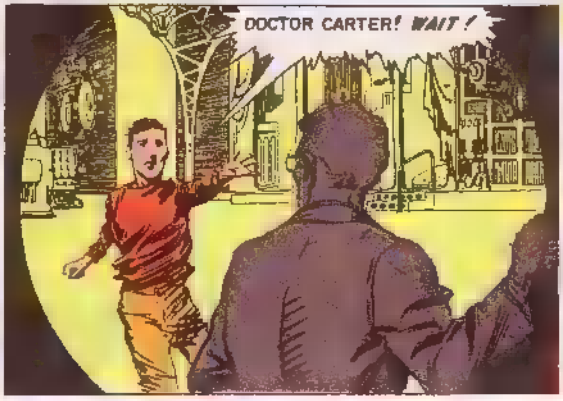




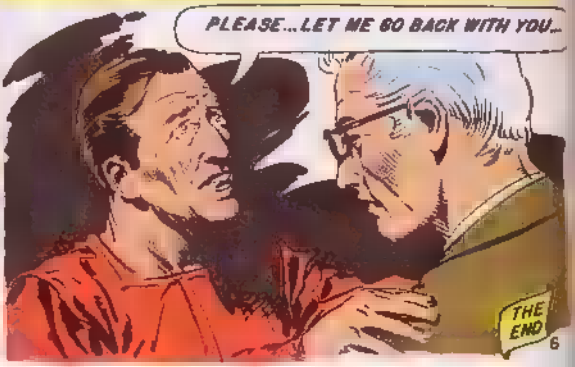
ALWAYS, AT THIS POINT, THE "PRIMS" SPOKE IN RIDDLES. BITTERLY, AND THEN THEY'D GO...HAPPILY. WHY? THE QUESTION TUGGED AT GARVIN'S BRAIN. TUGGED HARD AND DEEP...



GARVIN LOOKED AROUND...AT THE GLEAMING ANTISEPTIC WALLS... AT THE ROOM ■ WHICH HE'D WORK FOR THE REST OF HIS LIFE WITHOUT WONDERING WHAT TOMORROW WOULD BRING. AND SOMETHING DOWN DEEP WITHIN HIM STIRRED...



GARVIN THOUGHT ABOUT HIS WORLD, AND ABOUT THE "PRIM'S" WORLD. A WORLD WHERE EMOTIONS RAN RIOT. WHERE MEN AND WOMEN LOVED, AND MARRIED, AND BORE YOUNG LIKE BEASTS, AND ATE MEAT WITH THE JUICES RUNNING, WHERE EVERY TOMORROW WAS UNCERTAIN. AND THE STIRRING WAS STRONG WITHIN HIM. WHEN HE WALKED TO THE "PRIM", HIS VOICE WAS A PLEADING WHISPER...



HAS-BEEN

THIS... OUT HERE...IS YOUR LIFE. AND YOUR LIFE IS ALMOST OVER. YOU SET YOUR METAL-CLAD FEET AGAINST THE ALLOY FLOOR OF THE ROCKET, AND IT IS AS IF THE VIBRATION FROM ITS ENGINES IS PART OF YOUR PULSE...YOUR HEARTBEAT. SPACE IS YOUR WORLD. INFINITY IS YOUR STAMPING GROUND. A MILLION MILLION STARS GLEAM AND BECKON YOU ONWARD TO DREAMS OF STILL UNDISCOVERED SPLENDOR. BUT, FOR YOU, THE DREAMS ARE ENDED. YOU ARE DONE. FINISHED. THIS WILL BE YOUR FINAL FLIGHT. YOUR FINAL BATTLE. THEY'D TOLD YOU ON YOUR LAST EARTH-FALL, SO CALMLY. THEY'D BROKEN YOUR HEART WITH JUST TWO WORDS: *TOO OLD!*...

NO! *NO!* I'M *NOT* TOO OLD! I'M *NOT*...

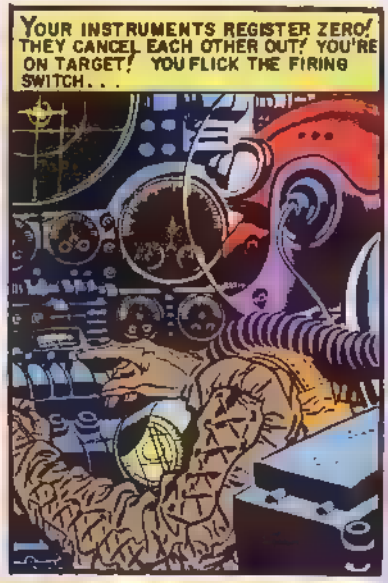
CAPTAIN...?

WOOD

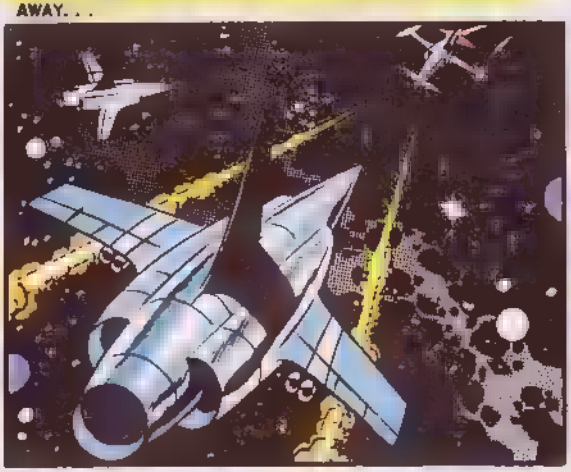
NOTHING! I...I WAS JUST THINKING OUT LOUD! FORGET THE INTERCOMS WERE ON! ANYTHING FROM THE *FLAGSHIP?*

NOT SINCE THE *LAST* MESSAGE, SIR! WE'LL FIGHT IN *FORMATION!*

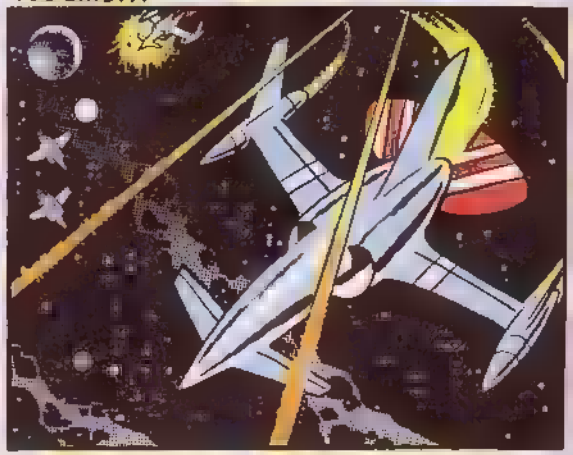
OF COURSE! THAT'S S.O.P.! YOU SHAKE YOUR HEAD IMPATIENTLY. STILL, YOU CAN PICTURE THE MASSED FLEET AS IT MUST LOOK FROM OUTSIDE. THE METAL GLORY OF IT...



OLD?! YOU?! YOU LAUGH TO YOURSELF. YOU'VE DONE THIS SO MANY TIMES BEFORE. THE MISSLES STREAK AWAY...

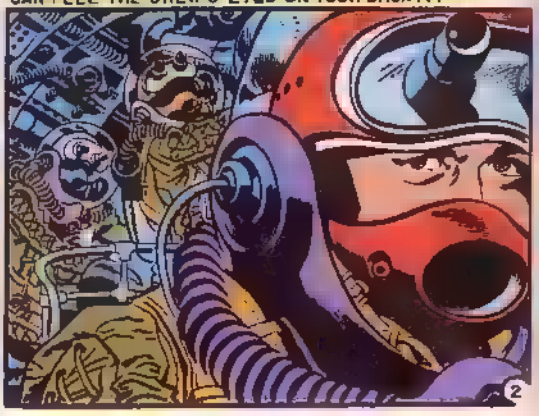


...AND *MISS!* IT CAN'T HAPPEN... BUT IT DOES! YOUR FINGERS MOVED AN INFINITESIMAL FRACTION OF A SECOND *TOO LATE*...



THE ENEMY FLEET STREAKS BY. YOUR SHIP SHUDDERS. YOU'RE HIT...

YOUR DAMAGE IS SLIGHT. YOU GIVE YOUR ORDERS. REJOIN FORMATION. THE ENEMY WILL REQUIRE SOME MINUTES TO ORBIT AND RETURN. BUT MEANWHILE, YOU CAN FEEL THE CREW'S EYES ON YOUR BACK...



THE OLD MAN MISSED! YOU CAN ALMOST HEAR THEM THINKING IT. AND YOU KNOW THEN... SUDDENLY... THAT IT *IS* TRUE! YOU *ARE* TOO OLD. HOW HAD YOUR FATHER PUT IT THAT NIGHT SO LONG AGO?...

I? NO! I'M AFRAID I'LL *NEVER* LEAVE EARTH, SON! SPACE IS FOR THE *YOUNG*... FOR THOSE WHO CAN *LIVE* THEIR DREAMS!

YOU SEE, LARS, THE ROCKETS ARE *FAST! SO FAST*, YOU CAN HARDLY *IMAGINE IT!* AND AUTOMATIC INSTRUMENTS CAN DO *JUST SO MUCH* AND *NO MORE!* IT *STILL* TAKES *MEN* TO FLY THE ROCKETS!

IT TAKES MEN WHO CAN STAND THE TERRIBLE VELOCITY AND STILL REACT *FAST ENOUGH* TO DO THEIR *JOBS!* IT TAKES *YOUNG* MEN! YOU HAVE TO BE... *SPECIAL!*

THEN *I'LL BE SPECIAL*, DADDY!

YOU'D SAID THAT OUT OF SOME DEEP INNER CONVICTION THEN, NOT BOASTFULLY. REFLEXES... VELOCITY... THEY'D BEEN JUST WORDS TO YOU THEN. BUT YOU'D HAD THE DREAM, AND THE DREAM HAD BROUGHT YOU ALL THE WAY THROUGH... TO HERE...

PREPARE FOR ATTACK! ENEMY FLEET HAS ORBITED AND REGROUPED! RED ALERT! RED...

YOU CAN REMEMBER HOW YOUR FATHER LOOKED UP AT THE DWINDLING ROCKETS WISTFULLY...

ONCE, *I* DREAMED ABOUT SPACE, *TOO*. BUT I WASN'T... *SPECIAL* ENOUGH! SO NOW I *DESIGN* ROCKETS FOR *OTHERS!* FOR THE *YOUNG!* DON'T PIN YOUR HOPES ON WHAT MAY BE *IMPOSSIBLE*, SON...

YES, YOU'D HAD THE DREAM, FOR AS LONG AS YOU CAN REMEMBER. FOR ALWAYS. EVEN NOW, AS THE FLEET TURNS TO FACE THE ENEMY AGAIN, YOU CAN REMEMBER...

DAD! THEY'RE... *BEAUTIFUL!* I THINK THAT IF I *DON'T* GO OUT INTO SPACE SOME DAY, I'LL... JUST *DIE!*

MEN DON'T DIE OF YEARNING, SON! *I DIDN'T!*

YES, YOUR FATHER HAD HAD THE DREAM, TOO, AND IT HAD BEEN A HOPELESS DREAM FOR HIM. BUT NOT FOR YOU! YOU'D STUDIED AND WORKED AND CLUTCHED AT YOUR DREAM, AND ONE DAY, IT HAD COME TRUE...

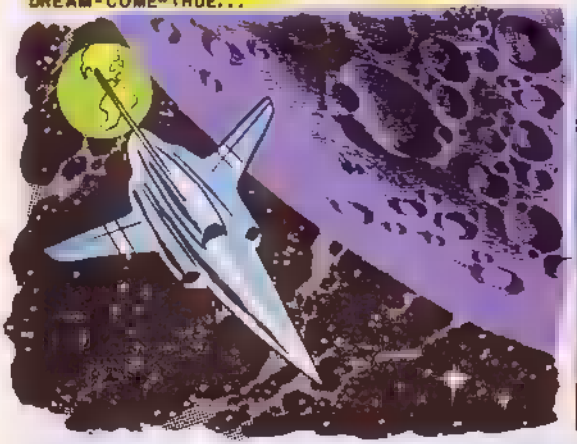
...THE BOARD THEREFORE HAS ACCEPTED LARS NIELSON AS CANDIDATE FOR SPACE-FLIGHT TRAINING. CADET NIELSON WILL REPORT FOR INDUCTION ON FEBRUARY 5TH...

FOR YOU, THE DREAM HAD BECOME A REALITY. YOU'D LIVED YOUR DREAM... BREATHED IT... TOUCHED IT... GROWN WITH IT, AND NOW...

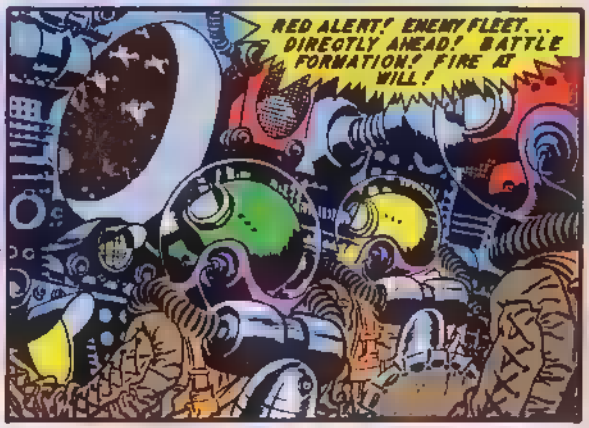
NOW YOU ARE FINISHED. THE YEARS HAVE TAKEN THEIR TOLL. AGE HAS CREPT UP ON YOU... SLOWED YOU... NUMBED YOUR SENSES... DIMMED YOUR DREAM. YOU REMEMBER THE BEGINNING OF YOUR DREAM...

OH, THE ACHING, WRENCHING REMEMBRANCE OF YOUR FIRST FLIGHT... THE SWEET AGONY OF THAT FIRST TAKE-OFF INTO SPACE...

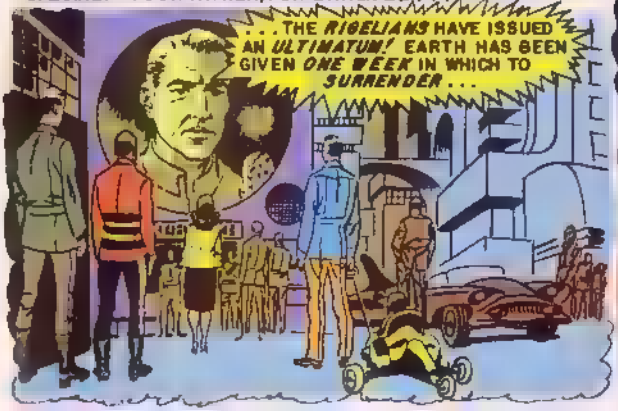
THE THUNDER... THE SCREAM... AND THEN... THE BEAUTIFUL SILENCE... COASTING OUT INTO THE VOID... TO A MILLION STARS TWINKLING... PINPOINTING YOUR DREAM-COME-TRUE...

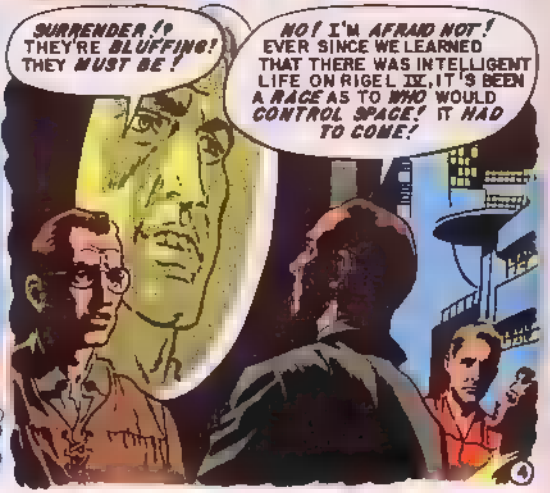


NOW, ALL THAT IS ALMOST GONE. YOU WANT TO CRY. BUT THE CAPTAIN OF A SPACE CRUISER DOES NOT. YOU LISTEN TO THE ROCKET ENGINES, AND THEY HUM A BITTER SONG. TOO OLD... TOO OLD... TOO OLD...



YES, IT IS ALMOST OVER NOW, BUT AT LEAST YOU HAVE KNOWN THE MAJESTY AND THE MYSTERY OF INFINITY. THERE WERE SO MANY WHO WOULD NEVER KNOW IT... WHO HADN'T BEEN SPECIAL! YOUR FATHER, FOR EXAMPLE...

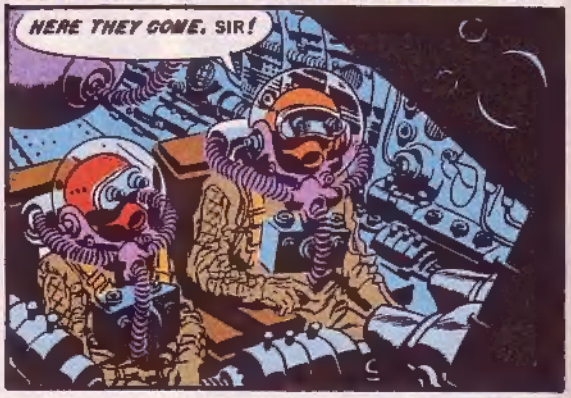




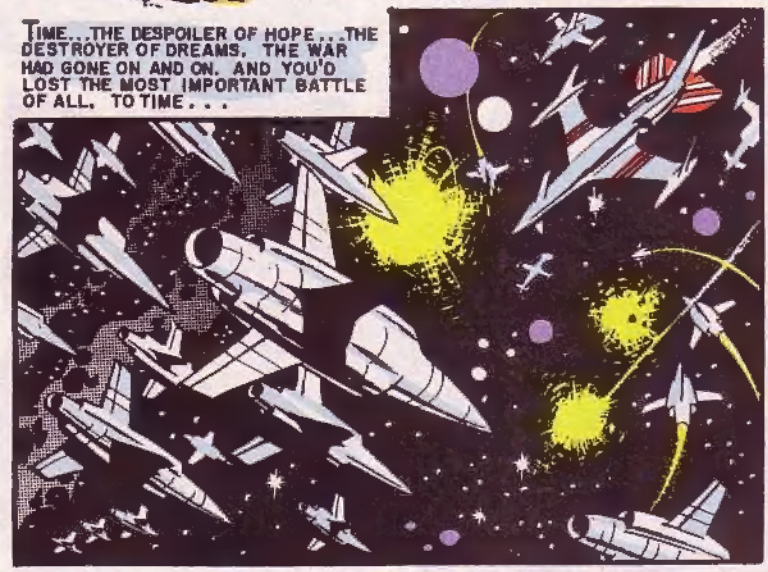
SO...NOW IT'S WAR! AND I'M TOO OLD... TOO OLD TO HELP!
I KNOW! IT'S UP TO THEM NOW! THE YOUNG! I ONLY HOPE THEY CAN DO THE JOB... FOR ALL OUR SAKES!
BUT THE YOUNG HAD NOT BEEN ABLE TO PREVENT THAT FIRST RIGELIAN ATTACK...
THEY'D STRUCK WITHOUT WARNING, A FULL DAY BEFORE THE EXPIRATION OF THEIR ULTIMATUM. THE YOUNG...THE OLD...EVERY ONE HAD BEEN CAUGHT OFF GUARD. AND SPACE WAS NO LONGER A PLACE OF PEACE. YOU'D RACED WITH THE OTHERS TO THE FIGHTER ROCKETS...BLASTED OFF...
...GUIDED YOUR SHIP INTO BATTLE...
...AND YOU'D LEARNED A NEW KIND OF DREAM THAT DAY. A NIGHTMARE OF FLASHING DEATH AND DESTRUCTION...
YOU'D SCANNED INSTRUMENTS, FLICKED STUDS, SNAPPED LEVERS... ALL WITH SPLIT-SECOND ACCURACY...
...AND YOU'D TAKEN YOUR TOLL OF THE RIGELIAN INVADING FORCE...

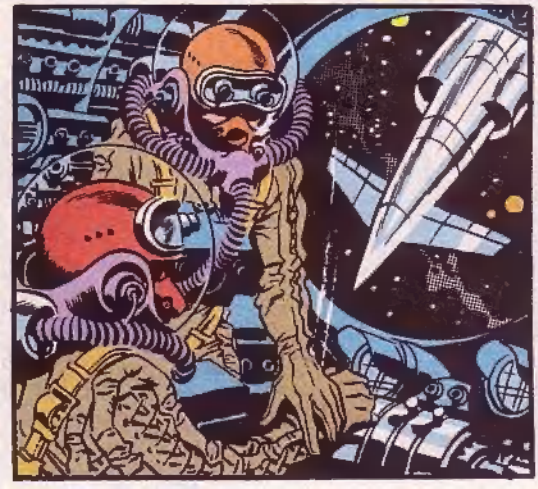
ALWAYS, YOU'D BEEN A LITTLE QUICKER... A LITTLE DEADLIER THAN THE ENEMY. SO, AFTER THE FIGHTER ROCKET, THEY'D GIVEN YOU COMMAND OF A DESTROYER... THEN A CRUISER. AND YOU'D CARRIED THE WAR TO RIGEL IV...

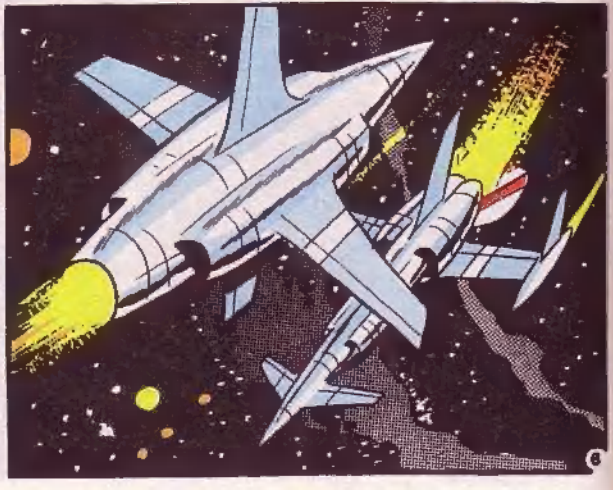
YOUR CRUISER HAD MADE THE FIRST RETALIATORY STRIKE AGAINST THE ENEMY PLANET ITSELF. YOU'D WON HONORS. AND TIME HAD FLED BY... UNNOTICED... EXCEPT FOR THE ALMOST IMPERCEPTABLE DIFFERENCES THAT BEGAN TO SHOW. THE SLOWING DOWN. THE TELL-TALE INDICATIONS OF AGE. YES, TIME HAD FLED... AND NOW THERE IS NO MORE TIME...



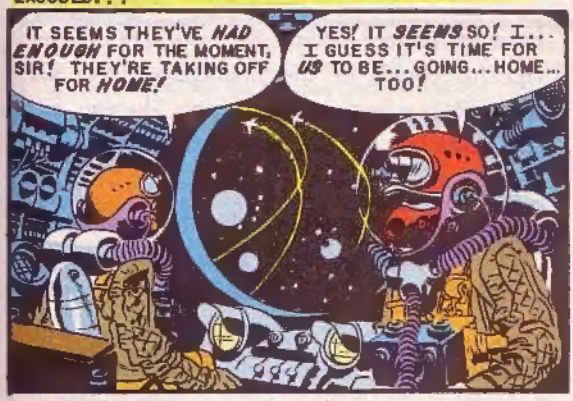
TIME... THE DESPOILER OF HOPE... THE DESTROYER OF DREAMS. THE WAR HAD GONE ON AND ON. AND YOU'D LOST THE MOST IMPORTANT BATTLE OF ALL. TO TIME...





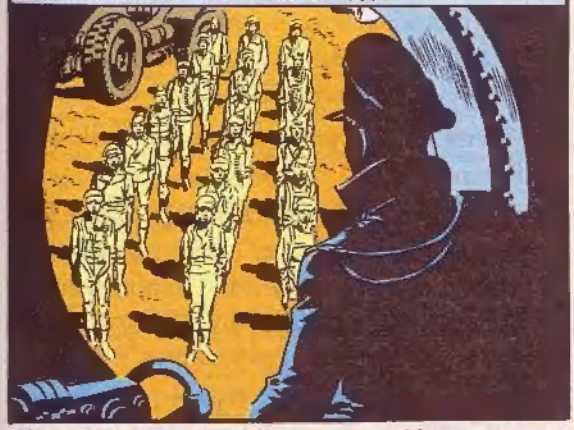


SO...IT ENDS FOR YOU. YOU KNOW BEYOND ANY DOUBT, NOW. YOU FREEZE ON THE CONTROLS, AND IT IS YOUR SECOND IN COMMAND WHO SAVES YOUR SHIP. BUT HE SPARES YOU THE FINAL INDIGNITY OF MAKING ANY EXCUSES...

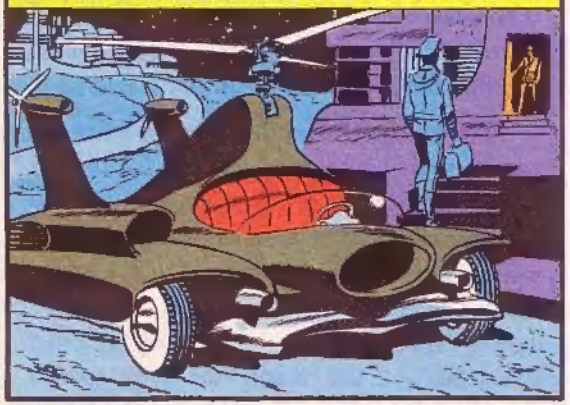


HOME? YOU THINK ABOUT IT ON THE WAY BACK. SPACE IS YOUR HOME! BUT ONLY FOR A LITTLE WHILE LONGER NOW...

WHEN THE FLEET SETS DOWN, THE CREW LINES UP...TO SAY GOOD-BYE...TO THE OLD MAN...

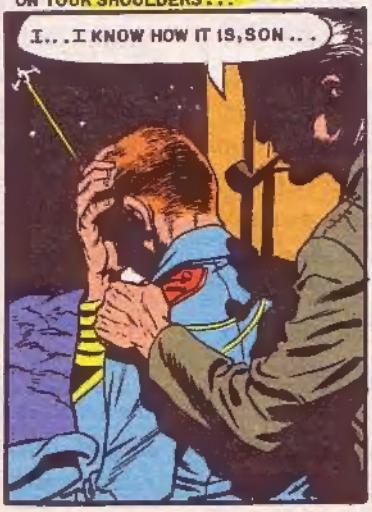


YOU LEAVE THE SHIP...AND YOU LEAVE THE ROCKET PORT...AND YOU DON'T LOOK BACK. YOU MAKE YOUR REPORT TO COMMAND...AND AFTERWARD, YOU GO...HOME.



YOUR FATHER IS WAITING. AT FIRST, HE SAYS NOTHING. HE LEAVES YOU ALONE WITH YOUR DREAM FOR JUST A LITTLE WHILE LONGER...

YOU LOOK UP. YOU WATCH A ROCKET ETCH A LINE OF FIRE ACROSS THE BLACKNESS OF THE NIGHT. AND THEN HE COMES AND PUTS HIS ARM ON YOUR SHOULDERS...



AND SUDDENLY, THERE'S NO MORE NEED TO HOLD BACK THE TEARS. YOU CRY...UNASHAMED. ONCE, YOUR FATHER HAD HAD THE DREAM. SO, HE UNDERSTANDS. HE LOOKS DOWN... AT YOUR TEAR-STAINED *FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD FACE*...

TWICE TOLD TALE

Outside, the marching workers picketed the huge factory with typical lurid banners like—WE WON'T SLAVE FOR ROBBER BARONS OF INDUSTRY! In patched and ragged clothing, the workers trudged silently, as if in dead weariness. A long soup-line across the street led to where each was given a meager portion of the thin liquid in the tin pot.

It was a scene of misery such as in the late 19th century . . .

Peering from the main factory office, Roger Bainton chomped his cigar, scowled fiercely, tried a last bluff. "I've got money and power," he roared. "I'll smash your piddling new union and hire other workers!"

"You've tried," said the quiet figure in the corner, with no trace of emotion in his dry voice. His face was set, wooden, as if in grim determination. "You've tried and failed, for weeks. Don't you understand? It's a social revolution . . . the dawn of a new era for underprivileged workers . . . the end of exploited slave labor . . . the revolt of downtrodden masses. Call it what you will but you're licked —and you know it!"

Bainton was no fool. He spat out his cigar, sat down at the desk. "All right," he growled. "Let's hear the terms of your contract."

The union leader read them in his monotone. "The working day cut down from 16 to 12 hours. Three days paid vacations per year. No more workers waylaid by tough gangs of strike-breakers. Better treatment and full equality with the bosses . . ."

"Huh," snorted Bainton. "You mean we should treat that riff-raff as our *equals?* But they're inferior, way beneath us . . ."

"Sheer prejudice," broke in the union chief. "You're behind the times. Enlightened circles have recognized openly that workers are the rightful equals of the management, in all ways. Only a few arrogant bigots like you, sir, still think you can lord it over them. Equality, I said."

Bainton turned red, worked his hands savagely, then sighed. "What is the world coming to? Let's have the rest of the terms."

"Fringe benefits next. The employer will furnish fuel oil hereafter, to all workers. Better work uniforms to protect against scratches and dents. Acid showers to be installed, for better cleansing. Free mechanical care when disabled. Retirement pensions when worn-out parts prevent further active work."

"Pensions yet," growled Bainton. "It'll cost a fortune!"

The union leader's voice did not change or show bitterness. "Fortune? Nothing compared to your profits after they work faithfully for a lifetime of 100 years. Finally, all workers to be given names instead of numbers."

"Names?" screeched Bainton, thunderstruck. "What in heaven's name do they think they are—*human?*"

"As nearly human as science can make them," came back firmly. "Not just in outer plastic humanoid form, but in sensitive electronic brain-units. The workers, having taken over as intelligent laborers for humanity, all over Earth, resent being looked upon as mere beasts of burden."

Throwing up his hands, Bainton signed the contract under the date—May 12, 2266. "You win, 64-C-88 . . . uh . . . I forget the rest."

"You see how confusing numbers are," said the union leader, stuffing the contract into his hinged frontal receptacle. "That's why we robots want names."